My Homeland.
Such a commonly used phrase, so often spoken and referred to without a second thought.

And yet, I believe that no other word—no other two characters—have had such a powerful effect and profound influence on each and every nation and people of the world. No, I *believe* this to be true. It is what I believe to be right, born of my own experiences and convictions.

Why is it that I have always been so bound up with this concept of homeland, both in the past and now? Throughout my entire life, I have lived "because of it," and I say that with pride, without shame. I've loved it alone, hated it only to love it again, left it and loved it still, returned to it and embraced it in love. And now, in my seventies, I quietly whisper the word "homeland" again to myself in a quiet courtyard. The moment I speak the word, thoughts come rushing in and I stop walking.

Since the dawn of nations, the history of nearly every people has been shaped by the defense of the homeland, the pursuit of its honor and prosperity, and the harmony and conflict that arise from such efforts. This is no exaggeration. For more than 70 years of my life, that has been an unchanging modern myth. Everything else changed with time, with civilization, with shifting trends—but the instinctive love a people has for its homeland never changed. It is a philosophy buried deep within the heart like an almond, a precious jewel of the soul.

I have seen this myself in many forms across Manchuria, China, Russia, and Eastern Europe—and I have been moved, overwhelmed by it.

To narrow the scope: since our nation was ruined by Japan's invasion half a century ago, we witnessed one after another—Min Yeong-hwan's suicide, An Jung-geun's shooting of Ito Hirobumi, Yi Jae-myeong's attempted assassination of Yi Wan-yong, the suicide of Colonel Park Seong-hwan and the subsequent uprising of his former regiment, nationwide resistance by the righteous armies, Kang Woo-kyu's attempt on Governor-General Saito's life... Countless patriots and martyrs who gave their lives without hesitation, embodying unwavering spirit and self-sacrifice.

Since the March 1st Movement of 1919, overseas independence struggles spread far and wide—especially in Manchuria and Siberia. Armed resistance there was a bloody, tearful battle, filled with hardship and loss. All of it, without exception, was the most extreme and sincere expression of love for the homeland.

I know this from my own long years of armed resistance. There were many days when, even when hungry and desperate to eat, I couldn't find enough food to fill my stomach. For 12 years, through bitter winters and snowstorms, I rarely had the proper clothes to wear. This isn't nostalgia for the sake of it. Back then, our meals weren't rice and meat, but broken bits of cold barley rice with soy paste or salted radish—and even that was hard to come by.

As a guerrilla unit without a steady supply line, if we didn't find a large Korean village, we had to survive on gruel made of millet flour mixed with salt. Sometimes, we couldn't even get corn or dried pumpkin cakes, and we would go three or four meals without food.

Even so, we carried over 100 pounds of weapons, marched through hundreds of li (miles) of mountains and wilderness in a single day, and engaged in brutal battles where blood was spilled. That hunger, that cold, that fighting spirit—they're still buried in my breath, in the spaces between each exhale.

How could I ever forget it?

In minus 30 or 40 degrees Celsius, through blizzards that shattered snow-covered mountains, finally receiving a padded winter uniform—though it came late—felt like an unbelievable stroke of luck.

And there was more. I had to witness wounded comrades choose suicide out of despair. Even those with minor injuries rarely received proper antiseptic. I myself had to pack my stab wounds with powdered sugar to prevent infection before going back into battle.

It was then that I truly learned what the homeland was. I came to know it again. I came to understand how deep the love for it could go.

During the so-called Heihe Incident, while we were cooperating with the Soviet Red Army as allies, we were ambushed by them instead. Thousands of our comrades were slaughtered on the frozen Lake Baikal like white flower petals falling to the ice. As their blood soaked into the snow, I realized something. I saw the path of the homeland outlined in those bloodstains. When the winds of Siberia blew away the scent of my compatriots' blood, I felt hatred for my homeland—but I turned that hatred into fighting spirit.

After the Battle of Cheongsanri, nearly 10,000 Koreans in southern and northern Manchuria were massacred in retaliation by the Japanese military—a cruelty beyond words. I know that in their final moments, those dying patriots saw the image of the homeland flickering in their minds. I still clearly remember what the survivors who climbed out of those mass graves said to me when I met them again. Even if I go deaf in my old age, those voices, those memories will remain lodged in my ears. When I die, they'll be buried with me, becoming one with the earth, lasting forever.

Despite all that suffering and death, they endured it without regret. When it came again, they accepted it and stood firm once more.

They never expected food, medicine, or comfort. They didn't dream of promotions, medals, bonuses, wealth, privilege, or pleasure. They couldn't even imagine such things.

And because I have survived, I now carry the burden of bearing witness. I feel it is my responsibility to testify to the truth. That ultimate and extreme form of love—was solely for the homeland. They had lost it, and with a desperate yearning to reclaim it, they struggled and gave everything.

It was in 1928, when Japan began actively preparing for its invasion of Manchuria as part of its ambition to conquer Asia.

At the time, not only the Japanese police and communists, but even Zhang Xueliang's regime, which ruled Manchuria, placed a bounty on my head. I had no choice but to change my name and flee to the remote and wild region of Silvi, one of the most desolate parts of northern Manchuria.

When I reached the Daxing'anling valley, I unexpectedly saw ancient pine trees scattered across the red sand slopes. A stream—resembling the Amnok River—flowed beside them. In that moment, I felt my entire body tremble, as if I'd been shocked by electricity.

How could natural scenery look so similar to the mountains and rivers of my homeland? It gave me an inexplicable sense of mystery, as if it were somehow connected to the land I had left behind. That feeling—those emotions from that time and place—are impossible to reproduce now from mere memory.

I could not keep walking. I stayed in that uninhabited wilderness, taking shelter in a cave without an owner, and for two years, until the Chinese national resistance led by Ma Zhanshan began, I lived there, longing for my homeland in nature that reminded me of it.

And then, after Korea's liberation on August 15, 1945, on the day after, as I flew from Xi'an, China, back toward Yeouido...I had nearly crossed the Yellow Sea when suddenly the west coast of my homeland appeared below. In that moment, I couldn't control the trembling in my chest. My eyes welled up with tears, and my entire body shook.

"That's it... that's Korea..."

I mumbled to myself as I gazed down at the long-forgotten coastline. That unforgettable, beloved land I had longed for through blood, through death, and through betrayal—there it was, finally before my eyes. At that moment, all the long, dark years of wandering, pain, and exile vanished into silence.

Even now, when I stand on this land, I find myself overwhelmed. Every step I take, every breath I draw, is filled with memories and the pain of separation.

Though time has passed and the world has changed, the image of that coastline from the air, when Korea returned to me—not through a map, not through a dream, but as reality—remains burned into my soul.

Even if everything else fades, even if my body crumbles, that moment will live on within me. That moment when the word "homeland" was no longer just a word but the pulse of life itself.

The Bloody Battle of Cheongsanri

1. *Prelude to War*

August 29, 1910.
That day was sealed with blood and tears.

From that day forward, our thirty million people were eternally separated from our homeland, and we were forced to part with our sovereignty forever. We were driven from all freedom and happiness and pushed into the endless pit of slavery.

With just one annexation treaty—signed in ink but soaked in betrayal—we handed over 4,500 years of shining history and 250,000 square *ri* of rich land to the enemy in a single morning.

The Japanese occupiers took control of one hundred percent of Korea's territory and seized 95 percent of all capital.

In every institution governing the Korean people, 90 percent of key positions were held by Japanese, and nearly 70 percent of mid- and low-ranking posts were also occupied by them.

In our homeland, there was no freedom of the press, no freedom of publication, no freedom of assembly, and no freedom of association.

For 3,000 days, we were trapped in a constant cycle of slaughter, imprisonment, beatings, violations, looting, occupation, and humiliation—with no end in sight.

But at last, the enslaved people, driven to the brink by abuse and persecution, stood up in resistance.

On **March 1, 1919**, the flames of revolution exploded across the country like thousands upon thousands of arrows. Cries for freedom erupted and spread like wildfire.

The fierce whirlwind of rebellion surged from cities to towns, from one village to the next, igniting the fury built up over nine long years of suppression.

Those flames spread like sparks passed from heart to heart.

People poured out of their homes and shouted, **“Long live Korean independence!”** They hurled themselves fearlessly into a sea of blood, sacrificing their lives with courage.

On that day, the very earth trembled. The ruling powers responded only with machine guns and artillery fire.

Thus, the **Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea** was established in **Shanghai**, and under its leadership, the armed resistance of Korean fighters in **Manchuria** began.

Even the brutal enemy had never felt such fear before. They rushed to reinforce the border, setting up one guard post every 50 meters.

But this security net could not contain the blazing desire for revolution and vengeance that burned in our hearts.

By 1920, the Korean Independence Army in Manchuria numbered nearly **30,000** fighters.

Our grassroots organizations grew stronger each day, and the power to strike the enemy grew ever more formidable.

Tokyo was shocked. The Japanese military commanders gnashed their teeth and resolved to carry out a full-scale annihilation campaign against the Korean independence forces in Manchuria.

This came just as Japan was preparing to send troops to **Siberia**. They stationed their main force around **Vladivostok** and linked it to northern **Hamgyeong Province**, planning a north-south pincer movement. This maneuver, if executed successfully, would clearly place Japan in a highly advantageous position.

Tokyo's greedy eyes had long been fixed on the **Manchurian continent**, rich in beans, millet, forests, and coal mines.

Behind their pretext of attacking Korean independence forces lay a deeper conspiracy: to send their so-called Imperial Army into fertile Manchuria and satisfy their ravenous imperialist ambitions—black as hell itself.

There is undeniable proof of this plot.

In **July 1920**, local militia forces in **Antu County**, **Jilin Province**, China, along with some patriotic youth, inspired by the Korean independence movement and unable to endure further Japanese deception and humiliation, joined with Korean fighters to form a volunteer army. They swore to resist the brutal Japanese military trampling Manchuria.

Earlier that same month, around 10 Korean nationalists carried out an attack on the **Japanese consulate in Hunchun**, killing over 30 Japanese policemen in a firefight.

Inside the consulate's warehouse, they uncovered a massive cache of weapons—clear evidence of Japan's planned invasion of Manchuria.

Instead of acknowledging their crimes, Japan turned around and lodged a formal protest against China, demanding retribution for the blood spilled by their own police.

Using this incident as a pretext, Japan began open armed operations in Manchuria by the end of **August 1920**.

They mobilized the entire **19th Division** and half of the **20th Division** from the so-called Joseon Army stationed in Korea and moved them north into northern Manchuria.

In coordination, elements of the **13th Division** already deployed in Siberia—including infantry regiments, cavalry units, artillery, and engineering corps—formed a mixed brigade that crossed the border into **Dongning County**, **Jilin Province**, and took up positions on the **Laoheshan–Tadianzhen** line.

Meanwhile, the **28th Brigade** of the **14th Division**, part of the Siberian Expeditionary Army, landed by sea at **Posyet**, a strategic point at the junction of Korea, Manchuria, and Russia.

From there, they advanced toward Hunchun in northern Manchuria.

Even part of the **11th Division** entered the **Dunhua** area by crossing the border.

Altogether, **five Japanese divisions** had now mobilized for this campaign.

With a force of over 50,000 troops, backed by an air unit, the enemy launched a massive operation aimed at surrounding us from all directions—front, rear, left, and right—and advancing in a tightening encirclement. Japanese armed police stationed throughout the Yanbian region were ordered to join in as well. Clearly, the enemy's intention was to strike Cheongsan-ri and annihilate the main forces of the Korean Independence Army concentrated there—specifically, the Northern Route Military Administration Office.

At the time, the main force of the Korean Independence Army in Manchuria was divided into two units: the Western Route under General Lee Cheong-cheon, operating in the province of Liaoning, and the Northern Route under General Kim Jwa-jin, active in Jilin province (Jomchasom). It was the latter unit that participated in the Battle of Cheongsan-ri.

The base of the Northern Route Military Administration Office was located deep within the great forests of Wangqing County and Sidapao in Jilin province. This vast, dense forest was part of the endless expanse of the Changbai mountain range, stretching for thousands of li. It was a marvel of nature—an ancient sanctuary untouched by time, surviving long after generations of humans had perished. The forest extended eastward to the Tumen River near Siberia and westward to Mishan, Hulin, and Yaohe. This remote wilderness proved invaluable in secretly transporting large quantities of Czechoslovakian weapons.

During World War I, after Germany and Austria-Hungary signed a separate peace treaty with Russia, Czechoslovakia gained independence from Austrian rule, becoming a free democratic state with support from the U.S., Britain, and France. News of this reached Czechoslovakian soldiers—two corps who had fought under Austria—and they decided to join the Allies, crossing Siberia through the Ural Mountains to reach the Western Front. While waiting for ships to depart from Vladivostok, they heard about the Korean independence movement. Remembering their own past under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they sympathized with our cause.

Eventually, they sold us weapons stored at the Vladivostok arsenal. The transaction took place deep in the forest, late at night. These arms—destined for vengeance and justice—were transported discreetly, batch by batch, into our hands.

Thus, we became well-armed: small artillery, heavy machine guns, Japanese and Russian rifles, grenades, and even 800,000 rounds of ammunition to repay our blood debt to the enemy.

We first established a military academy to train officers, enrolling about 600 cadets—all highly educated and outstanding young Koreans. We also formed two infantry battalions with a combined strength of 1,500 men. Meanwhile, we organized and trained the Korean diaspora in Manchuria, who wholeheartedly supported and protected us. They provided aid, ensured our safety, and even launched large-scale fundraising efforts to finance our operations.

With this, our strength grew day by day. So did the enemy's watchful eyes. Eventually, Japan's military elite in Tokyo set their sights on our stronghold in Wangqing and Sidapao. Applying pressure on the Chinese Kuomintang authorities in the Eastern Three Provinces, they attempted to use the blood and bullets of Chinese brothers to exterminate us.

At the time, China was deeply fragmented and in no position to resist Japan's demands. The regional authorities had no choice but to organize a suppression force. A mixed brigade led by Commander Meng Futu was ordered to launch an offensive against us. However, while pretending to comply with Japan's orders, Meng covertly contacted us and advised us to leave Jilin. This was his way of preventing bloodshed between Korean and Chinese comrades and avoiding diplomatic trouble with Japan.

Understanding China's difficult position, we left the Jilin border region and moved deeper into Mount Changbai to expand and build our strength. We then planned to cross the Tumen River like rabbits—swift and agile—and infiltrate deep into the Korean Peninsula via the spine of the Nangrim Mountains. Our goal was to launch a lightning-fast, thunderous assault on the enemy—a strike so devastating and fierce that it would awaken the sleeping millions of our people or, at the very least, make the enemy bleed, turning ten years of national humiliation into a cry for vengeance.

With this determination, we departed from our base and headed for Mount Baekdu, the sacred ground of the Korean people. We set out toward the shining peak of Jangbaek Mountain. But when our march reached Cheongsan-ri, we unexpectedly ran into enemy forces. There, the so-called Battle of Cheongsan-ri broke out.

Blood must be paid with blood. That time had now come. With this resolve, we stood and fought.

2. Dawn

It was the latter part of the seventh lunar month. The early autumn of northern Manchuria had already begun to show its quiet and desolate face. The autumn winds of Manchuria were especially light. Like soft down feathers, they brushed past the face with a gentle touch. This wind, whose very name we did not know, had arisen from a faraway place, crossed mountains, rivers, and forests, and finally reached us—and it whispered:

Before long, the harsh autumn winds will blow, and just like those chilly autumn days, a cold and sorrowful war will soon arrive.

Sure enough, as autumn approached, so too did war. I could sense the signs.

Yes! We had been waiting for this war for a long time. At that moment, we were already on a preparatory march, ready with both ammunition and our resolve to strike back whenever the enemy around us opened fire.

Of course, we knew that war was not some beautiful noun. It was like a starving wild beast that devoured human blood and severed countless lives. War is, without a doubt, cruel and brutal. But when the very right to live as a people is toyed with by another nation—when there is endless imprisonment, torture, and slaughter—what other path remains but war, in order to preserve the divine life bestowed upon us?

The only choice is to take up arms and fight to the bitter end. Whether we like it or not, we could only raise our hands high and welcome war. Even if it demanded rivers of blood and mountains of white bones...

We were marching proudly down the yellow dirt roads. Most of us were infantry, though some rode on horseback. At the rear of the column followed 180 supply wagons, each drawn by four strong native Manchurian horses.

The solemn sound of our marching footsteps echoed faintly through the hills and fields. Dust rose from the roads like thick fog. The road passed over one mountain and then another, over one pass and yet another. When we crossed one river, another appeared. After walking ten li, another ten li stretched ahead. Each time we stopped, it was always in villages where our fellow Korean countrymen lived.

It was when we passed through Tenpao Mountain (뎬빠오산). There was a silver and copper mine there, exploited by Japanese capitalists and guarded by a garrison like a pack of watch dogs. Under the pale moonlight flowing over the earth, our troops passed beneath the mountain without hesitation. The enemy guarding the mine trembled in terror, utterly panicked. The garrison threw up a tight cordon and stayed up all night, but we didn’t waste a single bullet on those worthless dogs.

As the days passed, the mountains and fields became blanketed in orange leaves, and the light of autumn gradually dimmed. While we fought a skirmish with the bandits, Chuseok (Korean harvest festival) quietly passed. The bandits were completely wiped out in a single encounter with us.

Crossing mountain after mountain and river after river, after more than a month, we finally entered the Cheongsanri region of Helong County, Jilin Province. Cheongsanri was also known as *Santoggo*. Two major roads passed through its outskirts—one led southward to the Tumen River, and just across that river was our homeland: Musan County.

To the west of Cheongsanri lay Chungshinchang and Myeongji-Ajang, areas inhabited mostly by Chinese. But the ones who farmed the lands in Cheongsanri were all our Korean compatriots.

Cheongsanri was a valley basin in the midst of Manchuria's rugged mountain ranges, stretching about 80 li long. At its narrowest, it was 4 to 5 li wide, and at its widest, 8 to 9 li. The northwestern part of Cheongsanri had relatively sparse forests, while the southeastern part grew denser and more lush. That area was covered in a mix of green broadleaf and coniferous forests. Towering 20 to 30 feet high were pine, fir, ash, and birch trees, packed densely together. The leaves blocked out the sky like layered doors of darkness, shutting out all light. Fallen leaves accumulated on the dark, damp ground year after year, forming a blanket two or three inches thick.

Walking across it felt like stepping on a springless sofa—or soft sand. It gave the eerie sensation of falling into a deep pit, or being pulled into an unknown, bottomless swamp. All throughout Cheongsanri, large and small valleys lay hidden.

This was the perfect setting for an ambush battle. Truly, this place was the most fitting for a fallen people to hold their blood-soaked grudge against the invaders. The ideal time to exact the price of blood had finally come.

It was the afternoon of the 7th day of the ninth lunar month—October 18th by the solar calendar. A still, quiet afternoon filled with a chilly air.

We were marching toward one of Cheongsanri's valleys when, suddenly, something appeared in our line of sight. From the distant edge of a vast plain, the enemy columns slithered forward like a winding serpent.

"The enemy!"

At that moment, our pulse stopped and our blood froze. But the very next instant, our blood surged again like a boiling spring, coursing through us with renewed force.

The enemy—made up of mixed units from all branches—was advancing toward Chungshinchang. The formation slithered arrogantly and menacingly like a writhing venomous dragon. Its tail was hidden in clouds of smoke that darkened the sky.

As we later discovered from captured enemy documents, the massive enemy force was led by General Dong Jeong-eon of the so-called Dongji Unit, using the 37th Brigade as the core force, supported by the 27th Cavalry Regiment and the 25th Artillery Regiment.

Apparently, the enemy had also spotted us. The distance between our forces was no more than ten li.

A burning thirst for revenge ignited in us. The blood in our bodies grew hotter and flowed faster. Before our eyes, all we could see were blood-red letters.

“Combat.”

3. Buudongbul (부우둥불)

First, we had to seize favorable terrain. We ordered the advance units to urgently occupy the northern high ground of Sungniping (숭린핑, 404). If the enemy arrived, we intended to engage them at dusk. The aim was to strike a decisive blow from a geographically advantageous position.

Our main forces then marched swiftly into the valley of Cheongsan-ri. By the time we arrived at Sinping, dusk had already begun to settle over the landscape. The local Korean residents gave us a warm welcome, providing hospitality, comfort, and support in every way possible.

Meanwhile, a report came in from our intelligence agent stationed near Chungshinchang, who had been observing enemy movements.

The enemy consisted of a combined force—infantry, cavalry, artillery, and engineers—forming a mixed brigade with about 10,000 troops in total. They were currently stationed at Chungshinchang. Due to uncertainty about our whereabouts, they appeared to have no immediate plans to attack. However, their forward units were deployed and maintaining watch at Myungji Ajang, about seven li (approx. 2.8 km) from Chungshinchang.

Relieved that the enemy hadn’t launched an immediate assault, we held a military meeting that night and reached the following decision.

While it was tempting to strike the enemy decisively on the broad plains atop the heights of Sinping, doing so might expose us to complete encirclement by their numerically superior forces. Therefore, we resolved to withdraw deeper into the valley and use the more favorable terrain there to inflict even greater damage on the enemy.

At 2 a.m., we began to move. We brought with us most of the Koreans living in Sinping, leaving behind only the elderly. We intentionally gave the enemy the impression that our soldiers were exhausted, poorly armed, and demoralized—to make them underestimate us.

We also sent many local hunters familiar with the terrain to scout the enemy's movements around Eolttokkowu (얼또꼬우) and the Musan road.

It was the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. In just a few hours, dawn would break.

We advanced toward Baiwonping (빠이원핑, 업졸 #). The heavy pre-dawn darkness seemed to swallow everything. The forest grew sparser, the valley narrower. The cold night wind brushed our bodies as if splashed with icy water. The autumn night was wrapped in a desolate silence.

A report arrived at headquarters: enemy cavalry scouts had been sighted at the rear with increasing frequency.

At 10 a.m., we reached our destination. I sent officers ahead to survey the terrain. That afternoon, we received further reports from the hunters. They said the enemy was attempting to bypass us at Fengweikowu (펑워이꼬우, 8067@) and another unit had crossed the river near a rice shop ferry dock across from Musan, advancing toward Jjajang (짜장, 출 ※#).

Judging from this, the enemy appeared to be planning an encirclement from three directions to completely annihilate our forces at Santtoggowu (산또꼬우).

According to our officers' reconnaissance, if we moved ten more li (approx. 4 km) further into the valley, we would reach an open field about 5–6 li long and 2 li wide. A narrow stream ran through its center, flanked on both sides by steep cliffs that looked as if they had been carved by a blade. Surrounded by dense forests, it formed a natural fortress from which no one could easily escape.

We immediately prepared food and split our troops into two formations.

The first formation, under the overall command of General Kim Jwa-jin, consisted of two-thirds of our infantry—those less trained—as well as non-combat personnel. We kept them far from the frontline to avoid unnecessary casualties.

The second formation, which I commanded, was formed using officer training school graduates and one-third of our infantry. We reinforced this unit with mortars and machine guns to confront any enemy pursuing from behind. By dusk, the second formation had arrived near the designated area. That night, we camped in the southern forest of Baiwonping and deployed our forward positions.

Thus, we were fully prepared to face the coming battle at any time.

4. From Midnight Until Dawn

We received information from a fellow Korean living in Hsinhwa that the enemy had lost morale and couldn't even think of fighting. So, leading with elements of the 27th Cavalry Regiment, we boldly pushed forward. Without encountering any resistance, we captured Paiyuanping in one swift stroke.

The enemy had believed they had us trapped like rats in a jar. They were sure that by tightening the encirclement, they could annihilate us completely.

It was an autumn night, the world blanketed in silence. The moon scattered silver threads across the misty darkness. Mountains and trees lay submerged in a thick silver fog. There wasn't even a trace of romance—only a tension, taut like a drawn bowstring.

42. The Campfire

The air was cold, blanketing the ground like a sheet of ice.

Clashes broke out constantly between our outposts and the enemy's, small skirmishes erupting throughout the night. Bullets whizzed across the sky again and again… ringing out with a sharp metallic sound.

That night, we were at camp, preparing for the battle that awaited us at dawn. It would be our first large-scale operation.

Our mood was a strange mixture of tension and curiosity… there was even something mystical in the air. We waited for battle the way a bride waits for her wedding day—nervous but filled with anticipation. Yes! On that first night, we opened our arms wide and embraced war like a bridegroom welcomes his bride.

The cadets of the North Korean Military Academy were truly tough as steel and quick as leopards. But at the same time, they had the gentleness of doves and the innocence of deer.

Though the day's forced march had exhausted them, the thought of the battle ahead filled them instead with an indescribable excitement.

As night deepened, the soldiers wrapped in their thin uniforms lay down in naturally formed hollows, covering themselves in thick piles of fallen leaves.

Nearby, the campfires burned like clusters of red blossoms. Occasionally, a gentle breeze would stir the flames and pass by.

The warmth of the leaves and the heat from the fire thawed their bodies and soothed their hearts with tender emotions. There, in that place, a kind of primitive romance brushed against us like a soft, sweet wind.

When I walked past them, they gathered around me like lambs to their mother, saying things like:

"Commander, look at this arm! And this shoulder! Don't you think I could take out a few Japs with these?"

"Commander, just sit with us a little longer. Let's spend a little more time together… who knows what tomorrow will bring?"

"Commander, don't leave us. When you're near, we feel brave. Even if the sky falls, we're not afraid."

"Commander, when the fighting starts tomorrow, we won't think about dying or being captured. We'll just kill every last one of them with our bullets and bayonets. Isn't that right, Commander?"

“Commander, if you ever see me retreating tomorrow… shoot me yourself with your pistol.”

“Commander, I don’t have any last words if I die. Just… if you get the chance, please tell my mother that her son fought bravely and died well. That he died in a way that honored how she raised him.”

“Commander, listen. Isn’t that gunfire from the forward post… doesn’t it sound so lonely? Like it’s calling to us?”

“Commander, why is the night so endlessly dark? When will the sun rise?”

Hearing these innocent, childlike words filled my heart with nothing but concern.

Invisible tears welled up inside me, and my chest felt tight.

But I couldn’t allow the emotions rising in me to spill over. I fought with everything I had to hold myself together.

With a gentle expression, I told them not to let their excitement carry them away.

44. The Campfire (continued)

I comforted them, saying: “Courage needs passion. But battle… battle requires cold resolve.”

I urged them again to rest well, regain their strength, and fight bravely in tomorrow’s battle.

But how could they possibly sleep in peace?

How could the fresh, flowing spring of life and vitality inside them not surge forward?

How could it stay still?

The young student Ji Yong-ho, a strikingly handsome 17-year-old, told me how he had run away to join the independence army just three days after getting married. The revolution had burned within him like a fire blazing in the darkness, powerfully agitating him and pulling him in until he finally abandoned everything and ran. But he said he had never imagined the night would be this beautiful.

On what might be his last night, before a dawn battle that would decide life or death, he thought back on that night in the candlelit East Room—filled with intoxication and excitement—and was overcome with emotion.

“Back in my hometown, people used to say I was really good-looking,” he said, a little shyly. “Captain, if I die tomorrow, that girl will never be able to marry another man as handsome as me. She really did love me.”

What could one say in response to such words from a dove already set free? A certain indescribable sentiment passed over me.

But sentimentality had no place here, at such a time, in such a place.

With a pure heart, I talked and shared stories with them, trying my best to help them forget the present, forget the past for the sake of the present, and focus only on what lay ahead.

“No revolutionary should cling to memories. The long road we’ve walked has been marked by suffering, each scar refining us and forging us into something braver, stronger.”

The night deepened. The warmth of the bonfire and dry pine needles eased the young men’s fatigue. One by one, they began to fall asleep.

But I could not sleep with them.

Every time a report came in from the outpost, it stirred new ripples in my heart. The bonfire continued to burn mysteriously—its flames swelling, shrinking, weakening, and strengthening like the red shadow of a mischievous child.

But the gentle spirit of the fire reminded me of unchanging friendship, and its infinite kindness quietly melted our souls, long frozen by a harsh and cold world. The dry, fallen leaves scattered across the forest floor gave off a fragrant scent, and the harmony between that scent and the fire’s warmth tenderly eased the loneliness and melancholy of the autumn night.

I strained to peer into the distant darkness, trying to pierce the silence of the night sky. But all I could see were stark, unmoving black shadows. Still, I found myself drifting into meditation within this forest wrapped in mystery.

From far, far away, the wind began to stir. One wind from somewhere collided by chance with another, creating friction and heat. Suddenly, the entire forest was engulfed in flame. This was a mountain fire so grand, so romantic, that no human mind could imagine it. It was also the forest's collective suicide—its soul trembling in agony. The sight was both majestic and horrifying, awe-inspiring yet maddening, unspeakably cruel.

The flames ignored day and night, tearing across borders and artificial boundaries. Whether the sky was cloudy or clear, they raged on like madness. And when fate intervened, the fire would meet its pitiful end. It left behind only a simple, scorched path—everything burned away, not even a single blade of grass left. All that remained was the name "clearing," given by mankind to what used to be forest.

Now, some people, to survive, had come to borrow these clearings—products of the forest's self-destruction—to wage war against other humans, creating a different kind of collective suicide.

The night continued to deepen. The moon had already sunk.

Comrade Lee Jung, secretary to General Kim Jwa-jin, was a tall, quiet man of 46. Sitting by the bonfire, he gazed for a long while at the drifting moon, then softly recited a five-line poem:

Falling pine needles,
The mountains are still,
The sky stretches far, and the moonlight shines brighter.
My warrior's heart runs with galloping horses,
But the night drags on, and morning feels far away.

As I walked through the encampment, I saw here and there the sleeping forms of young warriors whose bodies were covered in fallen leaves. They all slept deeply. Though lying in simple trenches, they seemed to be walking sweet and pleasant paths in a dream. Their glowing faces lit by the red firelight—those peaceful, happy expressions—looked like a painting, serene and graceful. One by one, my gaze drifted across their faces… my heart filled with a parent's boundless affection.

I couldn't pull my eyes away from those gentle faces. Before I knew it, tears welled up in my eyes. My vision passed over their young faces again and again.

At last, the black veil of night was lifting, and the milky light of dawn was slowly breaking across the sky.

5. Ambush Operation: The Night Before the Battle

September 10th, 5 a.m. Our infantry unit, assigned to my command upon demobilization, was positioned about 1,000 meters to the rear. The forest clearing in front of us had already been designated as the battlefield.

We made preparations to ambush the enemy there. Two of our main assault companies were positioned at the front: the right company was led by Kim Hoon (later a cadet at Yunnan Military Academy, then an instructor at the Whampoa Military Academy — eventually went missing), and the left company was led by Lee Kyoseong (killed in action). I personally took charge of the central position.

Our ambush positions surrounded the clearing and were located along the forested slopes, well hidden by natural features. Large fallen trees blocked the front, and thick layers of moss and blue-green lichens covered them like blankets, creating an ideal natural camouflage and cover.

Before launching the surprise attack, I issued the following strict orders to ensure we remained undetected and could strike like lightning:

1. Everyone must take off their backpacks and leave them in the rear with the reserve unit. Carry as little personal gear as possible.
2. Use full camouflage when entering the position.
3. Each person should remove 200 rounds of ammunition from their pouches and place them within arm's reach. Delays caused by fumbling for ammo during firefights are unacceptable.
4. No one is to smoke or talk before the shooting starts. Careless behavior must not give away our location.
5. The attack will begin only when I fire the first shot. No one is to fire on their own initiative beforehand.

After laying out the operation orders, I gave the men a final speech. Every word was choked with blood and emotion:

"The Cheongsanri mountain range is an extension of Mount Baekdu — the sacred birthplace of our ancestors. Even now, those ancient peaks are watching us. If the blood of Dangun still flows through our veins, then we must offer our bodies as sacrifices and avenge the 30 million souls of our people. If we fight bravely, the spirits of our ancestors in heaven will surely protect us."

The battle finally came.

Our comrades camouflaged themselves with pine branches. Once they lay down, their bodies were completely buried in the thick layer of fallen leaves and concealed by the dense forest. No one could distinguish where anyone was. This brilliant camouflage would have fooled even the keenest eyes.

And then — the khaki-colored devils appeared.

Around 8 a.m., the enemy's vanguard force — about 1,000 soldiers — began advancing toward the clearing, following a single winding trail that twisted like an animal's intestines. They strolled along casually, chewing on portable hardtack, utterly unaware that 600 gun barrels, burning with vengeance, were aimed directly at their chests from the surrounding forest.

The enemy scouts tried to track our whereabouts. They frequently bent down to pick up horse droppings from the ground. If the droppings were warm, it meant we hadn't gone far. If cold, we had already left the area. But in reality, we had arrived 3 or 4 hours earlier and were already in position.

Leading the enemy's vanguard was a staff officer with a thick mustache — the "advance command leader." Through the gaps in the pine needles, I could see the morning sunlight glinting off the four gold stripes on his epaulets and the golden star in the center — clearly identifying him as a Japanese major.

He wore gloves made of deerskin. In his right hand he held the hilt of his saber, in the left a telescope. With his chest puffed out arrogantly, he walked cautiously but proudly.

I carefully aimed my Type 38 cavalry rifle directly at the heart of that pompous officer. I was crouched behind the base of an old pine tree, pressing my barrel tightly against the trunk and slowly poking it forward just enough to fire.

The rest of the enemy column followed behind the officer like a long stream of khaki water, winding its way into the clearing. Finally, the last drop of that stream flowed into the open — right into the middle of our kill zone.

Their entire force had entered the crossfire trap we had laid.

One enemy scout stepped forward and bent down to check some horse droppings — only about ten paces from me. He crouched to test its temperature with his bare hand.

My blood boiled. A million resentments surged through me all at once. It was like my rage struck me in the back, slamming my cheek against the rifle stock, locking my shoulder in place.

At that moment, years of pent-up rage and humiliation came crashing down — so overwhelming it nearly ruined my aim at that officer's heart. Also resting on the end of my barrel was everything I had lived for — my dreams, my purpose, my pride.

Bloodshed!

With a single shot, the enemy was thrown off balance.

A storm of gunfire erupted from all directions like a furious tempest.

Thunderous Roar!

It was fiercer and more terrifying than the roar of thousands upon thousands of tigers. Six hundred rifles, six machine guns, and two mortars — the full firepower we had — concentrated all at once over the enemy's heads.

Bullets zipped through the air like lightning bolts or shooting stars, swirling and dancing above the battlefield.

Countless intersecting streams of fire formed the most dazzling and terrifying sea of flames.

The shells pounded the air like boulders melting and shattering on a volcano, shaking the hills and forests with their explosions.

The enemy fell like leaves blown by the wind, dropping one after another onto the ground.

Bodies piled up layer by layer, blood splattered the battlefield, staining the surrounding pine trees.

One leaf, then another — the green pine needles turned a dark, bloody red.

Anger and humiliation!

Steel and blood!

"Let's wash blood with blood!"

We screamed madly, shouting "Long live!" like maniacs.

The sounds of gunfire and our cheers merged into a rhythm — if it had a name, it would be called the "Symphony of Resentment."

The enemy fell — one after another!

The enemy collapsed — one by one!

Caught completely off guard by our sudden assault, the enemy had no time to think — they just dropped.

No time to load their guns, no chance to move machine guns into position, no clue where to aim — frozen, they fell forever.

In just one hour, the enemy's main force was almost completely wiped out.

The survivors resisted fiercely, blindly firing back.

But they still didn't know where the deadly bullets came from or who was killing them. They just sprayed their shots wildly into the jungle.

Enemy bodies piled higher and higher in the clearing, forming a mountain of corpses.

A wounded enemy sergeant with a broken leg climbed onto the pile of bodies, pretending to command the fallen platoon leader.

"Advance the machine gun squad!" he shouted like a madman.

Even as an enemy, his cry was brave and resolute.

But the moment he turned his back, he was hit by a volley of bullets and collapsed, adding to the growing heap of corpses.

Another enemy used the bodies as cover and fired wildly like a rabid beast.

But he too soon fell before our rifle barrels, head buried in the sea of blood, becoming target practice for the survivors.

Our rifles, machine guns, and mortars fired one after another without pause.

Blood-soaked clearing!

Red battlefield!

After an hour and a half, the enemy's frontline unit was completely destroyed.

"Long live!"

We shouted loudly and rushed out from the dense forest, quickly gathering the abandoned enemy weapons.

Only one enemy heavy machine gun remained in working condition; the rest were all damaged or useless.

We picked out the usable weapons and slung them over our shoulders.

The surprise attack was over. But the battle was not yet finished. Victory, too, had not yet been decided.

Not even an hour had passed before the enemy's main force—some 8,000 to 9,000 strong—arrived near the forest clearing to fight us. But the total annihilation of their advance unit meant they no longer blindly rushed into the open area. They now had to avenge the disgrace of that annihilation. They had to—because only then could the Imperial Army continue to receive the respect of the Japanese people. They must have sworn this deep in their hearts.

The battle resumed. The enemy lined up in row after row, layered in dense formations across multiple lines, preparing for a full-scale charge. This was a desperate tactic designed to force us to abandon our current position.

Enemy machine guns and all other weapons began their barrage. The pressure grew heavier. The gunfire intensified, more urgent.

"Charge!"

Enemy soldiers surged up the valley like a flood, and bullets and shells rained down like a violent storm. Sharp cries pierced the air, as if slicing through human hearts.

But we, using clever camouflage and cover, stood firm from the high ground. Rifles, machine guns, and mortars crisscrossed into a deadly crossfire, unleashing a storm of bullets upon the enemy.

In response, enemy shelling grew even fiercer.

At that moment, a student named Kang Wi, short in stature, abandoned the forward position under a torrent of bullets and retreated toward a cave in the rear, dragging his rifle.

“Kang Wi, get back out there!”

I screamed like a madman, consumed with fury.

My pistol immediately aimed at his head. Startled, he gripped his rifle tightly and ran forward. The gunfire grew even more deafening. Shouts echoed like thunder. Waves surged ever closer. The storm of bullets poured down endlessly.

We poured all our strength into our tangled crossfire lines, repelling the surge like a seawall against a flood, like a storm striking back at a storm.

Gunfire roared again, battle cries exploded anew, the waves surged once more, and the storm returned in full force.

But our crossfire continued to repel the waves, and our storm met theirs head-on.

Line after line, the enemy began to collapse. One row, then another! Their tightly packed ranks crumpled before our position.

After several fierce assaults and storms, all beaten back, the enemy finally had no choice but to call off their “mass charge.” Instead, they resumed intense machine-gun and artillery fire into the forest surrounding us.

Where was the enemy of the “Imperial Army”?
Where was their position?
Where was their main force?

They didn’t know. They couldn’t know.

Yet the “Imperial Army,” one squad at a time, kept collapsing near the forest clearing, struck down by this invisible foe. Never again would they rise. They had fallen—forever.

The glory of the "Imperial Army" was once like a blaze of ten million torches. But now, that blaze was mercilessly snuffed out by our bullets, soaked in vengeance and storm.

The sun inside the Rising Sun flag had lost its light. Even the bright cherry blossoms of that island nation now looked colorless.

Beyond the eastern sea, on the far hills, some two thousand beautiful, young widows now cried out in mourning.

But we must not grow complacent.

Do not rest. Not even for a moment.

Summon your strength!

Pour out every ounce of it. Squeeze out your entire body’s strength without hesitation.

To all the Imperial Army soldiers scattered across the forest clearing—

Come at us all at once!
We will baptize you in fire. Without mercy.

Eight or nine thousand enemy troops, even after suffering a bitter defeat, brazenly flapped their wings and began a pincer movement from both sides. They slowly closed in, step by step, tightening the noose. They were now compressing the encirclement around “Gongji” and launching an all-out assault on the descendants of Dangun. The third fierce battle had begun. But we stood our ground, facing them with unwavering resolve.

Fierce battle after fierce battle!

While the fighting raged on, a message arrived from General Kim Jwa-jin with the following orders:

1. The enemy forces retreating from Pyeongwi Ikko-u are expected to arrive in about an hour.
   If that happens, our retreat path will be cut off, so our forces will immediately retreat toward Eolttokkowu.

2. The second unit will continue holding the original position, cover the retreat of the first unit, and then withdraw at the right time.
3. The second unit must reach Jasan-chun (자산춘) by 2 a.m. tonight, which is about 160 *ri* (roughly 40 miles) from the current position.
   I will lead the first unit and wait there.

It was around 11 a.m. at the time.

The annihilation battle had now shifted to a covering operation.

Soon after, a liaison soldier reported that the first unit had already left Santokkowu. Our covering mission was essentially complete. I ordered one company from the western sector, led by Geunwon Han, to remain behind and continue providing cover while the rest of us began our withdrawal. We retreated toward Meotenling (머텐링) with all possible speed.

This treacherous path stretched about 80 *ri* (20 miles). The jagged peaks pierced the clouds, and not a single bird or beast could be seen in the mountain depths.

Shortly after we reached the mountaintop, Geunwon Han's company also completed their mission and returned, having narrowly escaped death multiple times. But most of them made it back alive.

We had pulled off a victorious retreat.

Yet the enemy's artillery barrage only intensified, shaking the earth and sky without pause.

Even though we had long since abandoned all our positions and withdrawn into the mountains, the enemy continued to bombard the area with ferocity. We couldn't understand why they were still shelling so fiercely.

The shelling grew more intense—louder and more violent, shells exploding relentlessly.

Then it dawned on us—there was a reason.

The enemy's artillery was mistakenly shelling their own retreating forces coming back from Pyeongwi Ikko-u.

The enemy at the front of Santokkowu thought we were still in front of them, and the forces returning from Pyeongwi Ikko-u also assumed we were still facing them.

Unaware that we had already slipped out from between the two enemy fronts (our uniforms were identical to theirs), they must have mistaken each other for us and ended up fighting amongst themselves.

We later confirmed that this judgment had been correct.

From midday until sunset, the enemy accidentally inflicted heavy damage on themselves in their own crossfire, reportedly losing six to seven hundred Japanese troops.

Evil always ends in self-destruction.

The final tally of the Battle of Baiyuanping was:

- Enemy killed: over 2,200
- Our side killed: only 20
- In addition to 3 seriously wounded, there were several dozen lightly wounded, all of whom could be treated easily.

This was the first war that Korea, having lost its nation, fought against the enemy Japanese forces—and it was also the greatest victory.

6. The Road to Jasanchun

Cold, hunger, and exhaustion wrapped around our bodies like a shroud. Even after enduring a half-day of fierce battle, we couldn't drink a single drop of water. Groping our way up a steep slope blocked by the mountain wind, we pressed on toward Jasanchun. We had no choice but to march at full speed.

We tore up vines and tied them into makeshift shoulder straps, pairing up to create temporary stretchers. We laid blankets over them and carried our seriously wounded comrades, keeping them with the column. Those with minor injuries either walked or rode on horseback. Even on this grueling forced march, no one lost courage or fell behind. But hunger was an invisible demon strangling our throats. The more we fought, the more this demon burned at our throats with fierce intensity. No amount of strength could cast off its grip, and no wisdom could rid us of it.

In that extreme suffering, we thrashed about, desperate to shake off the hold of this choking hunger. We searched for anything to eat. Eventually, like wild beasts, we roamed the mountains, eyes blazing with desperation.

"Wild grapes!"

Someone shouted in surprise and joy from a ridge.

In no time, those small, dark-purple beads were devoured by our famished group. Even as we marched, we kept plucking the grapes from the roadside vines, shoving handfuls into our mouths. We ate while walking and walked while eating. They tasted like sweet grapes—slightly sour but, to us, an incomparable delicacy.

The small clusters hung from every tree and bush throughout the mountains and valleys. No matter how much we picked or how much we ate, we couldn't exhaust them. The only regret was that, while the grapes did moisten our dry throats, they couldn't fill our empty stomachs. In fact, the sweetness only seemed to aggravate our gnawing hunger, burrowing even deeper into our bodies.

The deep autumn of Manchuria carried the biting chill unique to the northern climate. The sharp autumn wind sliced through our thin clothing like a blade, cutting into our skin.

There were no real paths in the forest. Wherever we walked became the path. Fallen trees and crumbling rocks littered the way, and the slopes only grew steeper. When dense thickets of underbrush blocked our route, we had to hack through them with axes to move forward.

Our entire bodies were locked in an unending struggle with the mountains and forests, and in constant battle with hunger, cold, and fatigue. The black air of night brought in even colder winds. A round moon rose slowly over the mountain ridge, casting a dazzling silver light.

That moonlight touched the mountains and plants with its cold, pale fingers, and guided our starving column forward. The moonlit wilderness, soaked in that frigid glow, felt even more desolate and silent. The moonlit night was icy and unbearably melancholic. It seemed beautiful, yet it reflected a sorrow that weighed heavily on us.

We crossed creek after creek, each glinting with that somber moonlight. These streams, large and small, flowed through the mountain valley like veins, twisting and merging.

The widest creek was about 12 or 13 meters across, and the current ran fast. When it struck the rocks, even the moonlight shattered and scattered with it. In the shallowest parts, the water reached our knees; in the deepest, it rose to our chests.

As we crossed the water, the moonlight in the stream felt even colder. It was as if sharp blades pierced through our soaked uniforms, stabbing our skin. Smooth stones lined the creek bed, making it dangerously slippery and difficult to cross.

But we conquered the mountains and streams in the end. Our clothes were soaked, dripping with water. The bitter cold wind froze us to the bone.

After crossing countless mountains and streams, our column finally emerged onto a long, flat road. From a scattered, ragged line, we reformed into a disciplined, orderly column—a straight line of warriors.

The formation, having completed its **reorganization** and **regrouping**, began advancing once more. At that moment, one comrade suddenly broke away from the column and ran into a vegetable field by the roadside. In a field that hadn't yet been harvested, he yanked out a large radish. Just as he was about to bite into it, swallowing his saliva in anticipation, a loud shout rang out.

“Drop that radish! That kind of behavior is a disgrace to the entire army! While all your comrades are starving, how can you abandon the unit and help yourself to someone else’s crops? Because of selfish bastards like you, the discipline of this whole army falls apart!”

Even I scolded him harshly. He hung his head, and the appetizing radish slipped weakly from his hand and fell to the ground.

The column continued forward. No one again dared to break formation on their own. Cold, hunger, fatigue, thorny paths—none of it could break us. The victory at Baiyuanping burned like flames in the sky, melting our frozen bodies and reigniting a fire of joy and conviction in our hearts.

That conviction became a sharp blade, cutting through every hardship and pain that rushed at us. After fasting for 14 hours, we broke through a 180-ri (about 70 kilometers) march. At 2:40 a.m., we finally arrived at Jasan-chun. There, the two separated units reunited. Victory was ours!

All the anxiety and worry that had haunted us vanished completely. Hugs and cheers! Tears and laughter! Shouts and emotion! Comrade-to-comrade affection! Victory and hope!

It was truly a night of overwhelming passion and emotion.

General Kim, who had led the advance unit and had been anxiously waiting for us at Jasan-chun, hugged me and wouldn’t let go for nearly 30 minutes. With tearful eyes, he said nothing but communicated everything. All the enlisted soldiers were watching.

At that moment, the soldiers and local villagers of Jasan-chun burst into joyful cries. General Kim later told me that he had believed we wouldn’t be able to escape from the valley of Cheongsan-ri after completing our rear-guard mission. He had expected we’d lose at least half of our fighting unit.

Our casualties included two platoon leaders and about 20 missing in action (which we later confirmed were killed in action, though we didn’t have the time to confirm this during the operation). But we had inflicted enormous losses on the enemy.

Jasan-chun (자산춘) was a large village formed by people from Kapsan County in North Hamgyong Province, which is why it was called by that name. Their love for their fellow Koreans, patriotism, and sincere hatred toward the Japanese manifested in the enthusiastic way they welcomed us. Despite it being the middle of the night, all the women were mobilized to help the frozen soldiers warm up. They lit fires in all the heated rooms, and using every bit of household cookware they had, they cooked several batches of rice.

There were no rice paddies there, so there was no white rice. The best they could offer was millet. They made sticky glutinous millet rice, known for its chewiness, and the soldiers gratefully devoured it.

After enduring extreme fatigue, hunger, and cold all day, the sudden warmth of the room and the steaming hot millet rice overwhelmed us. One by one, most of the comrades collapsed wherever they could—on the floor or on the heated ondol. The soft, warm air filled every corner of the room, wrapping our exhausted bodies like a cozy blanket. The sweet, peaceful rest made our limbs go numb… we slipped into a complete state of paralysis.
The comrades needed rest.
We really needed to rest.

But we received the following report from the villagers:

Around dusk, roughly 120 enemy cavalrymen arrived at Chuyiping and were still stationed there.

General Kim Jwa-jin, Chief of Staff Na Jung-so, and I discussed our next operational plan and decided to attack Chuyiping at dawn the following day. To do that, all preparations had to be completed by 4 a.m.

The comrades, who had barely slept an hour, had to get up again.

4:30 a.m., movement began.
Eolttokkowu was surrounded on three sides by high mountains. One major road ran through the center, passing through Marukkowu and leading directly to Wurangchon. Chuyiping was a Korean settlement nearby, composed of three clustered villages. The enemy was stationed in one of these.

To the north of Chuyiping, a nameless stream flowed toward Eolttokkowu. The stream was about five meters wide, with both banks steep and rising nearly five feet.

All units mobilized.
Unit 2 took the lead, followed by Unit 1. There was a single house on the outskirts of the village, and the villagers there confirmed that the enemy was holed up in the clustered village area. Thinking we were still 60 kilometers away, the enemy had carelessly gathered their forces in one spot. They had only a few mounted patrols guarding the perimeter and had neglected proper security.

I covered a flashlight with my hand and shone it on the ground. Sure enough, there were countless fresh hoofprints with newly nailed horseshoes—proof that our intel was accurate.

We established our attack units as follows:

- **Captain Geom Hoon's unit** would scale the northern mountains, move covertly and swiftly, and occupy the Marukkowu pass to cut off the enemy's retreat.
- **Captain Lee Min-hwa's unit** would seize the southern high ground of Chuyiping.
- I would lead Captains Han Geun-won and Lee Gyo-seong's two companies across the stream north of Chuyiping, skirting the edge of the hill, and, once reaching the east side of Chuyiping, shift direction to the right and prepare for a frontal assault.

The pre-dawn cold blanketed everything in a layer of white frost. The wind across the Manchurian plain felt like it pierced right into our bones. The air was so crisp and sharp that it pricked our skin like rose thorns with its glittering silver frost.

Around 5 a.m., dawn broke.

Captains Lee Min-hwa and Kim Hoon's two companies had already reached their designated positions despite the biting cold.

Attack commenced.

I led the two companies forward along the stream.
Hiding behind the high embankment, we waded through icy water that reached up to our navels. The vanguard had already reached the eastern edge of Chuyiping. Soaked, we climbed up the hill. The cold wind froze the water on our bodies into clear icicles, turning us into ghost-like silver figures. Just then, we were spotted by the enemy's mounted patrol.
A gunshot rang out.

Shimada fought desperately for a while, but in the end, his entire body covered in blood, he fell from his horse.
I chased after the four fleeing enemies. They had nowhere left to run and jumped into a sweet potato pit. I followed them and shouted,
"Korosanaika! Ryuujou shite dete koi!"
(*"I won't kill you! Throw away your guns and come out!"*)

Their answer was gunfire.
I quickly took cover.

Just then, **Comrade Kim Heung-ryeol**, a renowned pitcher from his baseball days, threw a grenade into the sweet potato pit from about 50 steps away.
His throw was unbelievably accurate!

With a bang, red sweet potatoes soaked in blood burst out in every direction.
The battle came to a temporary end.

How miserable the battlefield was!

Everywhere we went, there were human corpses, dead horses, wounded soldiers, wounded horses...
The enemy soldiers' khaki uniforms were scattered all over the village.
The ridge, the road, the riverbank, in front of gates, around the village—everything that had been covered in white frost was now a gruesome scene too horrific to look at.

Water bottles, ammunition pouches, gun barrels, saddles, packs, blankets—
These were scattered in disarray, blocking the paths.

And the corpses, soaked in crimson blood, lay on the ground in their khaki uniforms, bathed in the blinding morning sunlight.

Ah! What a horrifying, yet strangely beautiful sight it was.

Dead horses were lying everywhere.
The traces of their desperate struggle to stay alive were still vivid.

They had raised their long necks—characteristic of improved-breed horses—and collapsed in the final throes of agony and despair, using every last ounce of strength.
In the places where they had tried to stand again, they faltered, just like a lamp burning its last drop of oil before going out.
The long necks they had lifted with all their remaining energy dropped to the ground like stone pillars.

Their dark brown manes turned crimson from their own blood.
Soon, their whole bodies stiffened.
Those once lively and energetic beasts were still forever.

The wounded horses that hadn't died yet were gasping in unbearable pain,
letting out moaning sounds, almost like long sighs.

The pitiful, pleading cries sounded like they were piercing through one's chest.
But the horses were not our enemies.

Holding back tears, I raised my pistol and shot the moaning horses in the head.

In this battle, except for the four fleeing soldiers, **all 120 men** of Shimada's cavalry company were **completely annihilated**.
They were the advance company of the **27th Cavalry Regiment**, led by **Colonel No**.

On our side, we only had **two dead** and **seventeen wounded**.

Besides that, we captured **two horses**, several **Type 44 cavalry rifles**, **military swords**, **binoculars**, **telephones**, and other supplies.

Many of our comrades also obtained **winter hats with ear flaps** (harbor-style caps).

I myself received only a minor graze from enemy fire on my right thigh,
but in return, I got **Company Commander Shimada's 12x binoculars**.

Also, we discovered **portable hardtack** and **canned beef** in the enemy's horse packs.
We didn't have time to open the cans,
so we just filled our stomachs with the dry biscuits, still stained with horse and human blood.

But that wasn't all.
Inside a **metal canister** in Shimada's horse pack, we found something rare and precious—a report Shimada had just written.
The seal on the envelope hadn't even dried yet.

It was meant to be sent to **Captain Kano**,
but by sheer luck, it became a faithful intelligence report for **us**.

According to the report,
the **19th Division Headquarters** was stationed in **Yulangchun**,
and Shimada's company had been dispatched to **Chui-ping** to guard the **front lines**.

The contents of the report were as follows:

1. Arrived at **Yang Suchuan (Chui-ping)** at dusk yesterday. Made camp.
2. The enemy on the hill appears demoralized due to cold and poor shelter. No signs of imminent movement.
3. We are continuing surveillance.
4. Personnel: 120 men and horses.

After reading the report,
we forgot all about collecting the dead bodies, equipment, and ammo,
and stuffed our mouths with hardtack and canned beef
before sprinting toward the **Maruko hilltop**.

"In an encounter battle, victory lies in seizing the most advantageous point in the mid-zone before the enemy does"—
this is a principle of battlefield strategy.

We had to race to occupy the **Maruko hilltop**.

We couldn't help but feel grateful to **Company Commander Shimada**,
who, in dying, had helped us escape from the enemy's encirclement.

It was exactly **7:30 AM on the 11th**.

8. The Battle of Marukko'u

The Battle of Suipyeong was already over. The few remaining enemy cavalry who fled likely ran off toward their command post in Wirangchon.

We junior officers advanced at a near-run toward the high ground at Wirangchon. By then, the enemy had already begun shelling us with heavy artillery. The sound of the cannons felt like it was ripping the earth apart.

We had heard plenty of gunfire before, but the enemy had only used mortars or small field guns up until then—mostly light infantry support artillery like mountain guns or light howitzers. That was all we had known, so this was the first time we were hearing real heavy artillery. Heavy artillery is something normally deployed only to divisions or larger units.

The Japanese were trying to suppress us with overwhelming fire from heavy artillery.

At that moment, one of the staff officers shouted frantically, “They’re using heavy artillery!”

General Kim Jwa-jin calmly replied, “Ah, has this guy lost his mind? You call that heavy artillery? It sounds more like water splashing!” With a squint and a smirk, he brushed off the concern.

He was using humor to ease the soldiers’ fear. Even with a massive enemy right in front of us, he remained composed and showed sharp psychological insight, knowing exactly how to defuse the tension.

As soon as he said “Splashing water!”, the officers caught on and told the soldiers, “Looks like the Suipyeong watermill just started turning again.” It was a deliberate lie to calm them down. On the battlefield, officers naturally act like hypnotists, and their words shape the mindset of the soldiers. In most cases, the soldiers’ mood changes according to what their commanders say.

The enemy cavalry we were about to crush was the core force of Shimada’s 27th Cavalry Regiment, under the command of Captain Kano. Apparently, the enemy had no idea we were waiting on the high ground. Eager to seize it as quickly as possible, they charged uphill at full speed. They didn’t even send scouts ahead—just charged up the valley in a column formation.

We unleashed six medium machine guns and two mortars into the valley. One of the machine guns was a French Hotchkiss, and the rest were Maxims and Colts. Each ammo belt held about 250 rounds.

We fired into the center of the column, mowing down both the front and rear ranks of the enemy cavalry. The imperial troops fell in waves.

Infantry following behind the enemy cavalry began attacking as well. From the direction of Wirangchon, the enemy's artillery fire continued without pause. The dull roar, the devastating blasts—it was clear a massive enemy force was making a full assault.

We had to narrow the front where we were taking fire! We had to concentrate our forces! We had to seize the high ground!

Lieutenant Han Geun-won was ordered to send Kim Hun’s platoon in support. Meanwhile, Lee Min-hwa’s platoon was ordered to occupy the northern high ground of Suipyeong. I once again requested that the reserve unit quickly climb up to the northern high ground of Marukko’u.

The enemy launched a fierce attack with the strength of an entire division.

They opened fire with light and heavy artillery, trying to hold back our forces at Suipyeong and cover the main assault force.

Eventually, enemy troops reached the slopes of Marukko'u. We had to stop their final push with everything we had!

Comrade Choi In-geol, commander of the machine gun company, personally pulled the trigger and fired off a full belt of 120 rounds in one burst. As the enemy pressed forward, they were mowed down, and even as they fell, more came charging in behind them. The fiercer the enemy attack, the more tenaciously we resisted.

Although we were outnumbered nearly ten to one—twenty thousand to two thousand—we held the advantage of the mountaintop and had iron will and courage on our side.

We threw everything we had into the fight.

We even gave orders to the civilian porters.

"We are not just fighting with weapons! If you have nothing else, fight with your bare fists! And when the enemy comes close, throw grenades! Throw them with all your strength!"

Endless enemy shells kicked up clouds of yellow dust. In the wind, General Kim Jwa-jin's hat flew off. He continued directing the battle with his bare head. My own military saber was split clean in two by shell fragments. My nose and mouth were covered in blood.

Was it nature that helped us? Or divine intervention?

We, so few in number, were fighting a massive army head-on. In the morning, we attacked from east to west. In the afternoon, the enemy attacked us from the same direction. We could see the enemy clearly, but they had to fire blindly at flickering flashes of light. This wasn't a planned tactical maneuver. Rather, it was a natural shift from passive defense to initiative-taking offense —a maneuver enabled by our small numbers in a massive battlefield.

Moreover, we had trained in mountainous terrain, and our feet were swift thanks to our light, soft mituri shoes. The enemy wore stiff, slippery Japanese leather boots. We each carried no more than 300 rounds of ammunition for convenience in guerrilla warfare, but the enemy didn't even know how to use ammunition belts. They used old ammo pouches, leather cartridges on military belts.

When battle heated up, they often forgot to close their ammo cases after firing from prone positions, and as they stood up to run, the bullets would spill all over the ground. We also organized armed guerrilla units and moved through Mt. Baekdu and the Nangnim Mountain Range to advance on Seoul. Our military uniforms weren't just for camouflage—our hats even had red rims, identical to the Japanese military's, as part of a long-term guerrilla war strategy. The disguise worked perfectly.

The enemy was terrified and fired wildly into every mountain ravine. It was absurd. Yet it had to be witnessed to be believed. Their planes could barely lift off, fluttering in panic like frightened birds, and soon their beautiful wings were soaked in crimson.
Even our horses collapsed, drenched in blood.

One comrade, after a brutal fight, collapsed with 19 enemy bullets in his body. Enraged and burning with fury, he sat, laid, and stood shooting like a madman, firing in bursts, taking down more than 20 enemies by himself. Was blood stronger than fire? From the hearts of comrades burst scorching-hot blood that extinguished the flames and shattered the enemy's furious assault.

Realizing they couldn't take the mountaintop by frontal assault, the enemy tried a different tactic. They released an entire cavalry regiment to circle around and cut off our retreat from the rear. If they succeeded, we'd be in grave danger. We had to crush their flanking maneuver.

Immediately, we withdrew from the first peak and resisted on the second. Again, the enemy tried to circle our flank. Fierce fighting ensued. We moved to the third peak. The enemy kept circling, and we kept retreating from mountain to mountain. The fighting continued nonstop from morning till night.

We were starving—but there was no time to notice or even to eat. The village women wrapped rice in their skirts and, dodging bullets, climbed up the mountain to feed our comrades, placing mouthfuls of food into their lips—like mothers feeding their children with loving, sacred hands.

What holy love, what precious gift it was! We swore we'd repay it with our blood—repay it with our lives, no matter what.
We ran, from one mountain to the next, forgetting everything else.
During that time, our bodies were consumed by exhaustion. Midway, I could no longer even lift my legs at will.

Falling behind my comrades, I was crawling up a slope. The new position was only 20 or 30 meters ahead.
Then, about ten enemies began charging up behind me, shouting:

"Ai! Chō ossu! Kamāero! Ai! Sō ossu! Kamāero!"
("Get that bastard! Grab him!")

I looked up at our position ahead and tried to run, but my legs felt like they weighed a thousand pounds. They were like wooden stakes, numb and unresponsive. My mind had already lost the battle against my worn-out body.

There was nothing more I could do but give up and surrender to fate. I quickly hit the ground, gripping my rifle tightly, preparing for a final, bloody gamble—offering my life in exchange for just one more chance at life.

The enemy was nearly upon me.
From the mountaintop, my comrades laid down fierce cover fire and shouted with all their strength:

“Run! Hurry up—run!”
“This is bad! Real bad!”
“We’re going to lose him... we’re going to lose him!”

Just then, like a wild boar hit by an arrow, Kim Yoon dashed down from the mountain top. He grabbed me by the collar and, like an eagle snatching a chick, he swooped me up and flew off.

In just a few seconds, I crossed the boundary between death and life.
The bastards chasing me couldn’t withstand the hail of bullets from my comrades and fled, leaving behind two dead bodies.

From death to life—from life to death—the cycle of fate turned once again.
The sun began to set.

After days and nights without sleep, General Kim Jwa-jin threw his exhausted body to the ground. Right now, he’s snoring beside me. I couldn’t bear to wake him—his face, worn out from sleepless nights, looked sunken and tired.

The enemy’s assault had weakened, but they were still advancing steadily.
Our position was becoming more and more unfavorable.

Under the bright moonlight, General Kim woke up.
After a long, tense discussion, we reached the inevitable conclusion: to preserve our strength, we had no choice but to retreat from this place.

We left behind two platoons, led by Kim Hoon and Han Geun-won, as the rear guard under Kim Hoon’s command. Their mission was to cover the main unit retreating toward Route #98009 in the direction of Laotoko.

A desperate defensive battle unfolded. The rear guard unleashed a superhuman hail of gunfire on the enemy. Their rifles overheated, and their comrades’ hands were close to burning, but no one eased up on the trigger.

The machine gun company commander attached to the rear guard, Choi In-geol, was a warrior who had grown up in Siberia and had the face of an African. He went berserk, almost like a madman. When more than half of his gunners were killed or wounded, he took over the firing himself. When the horse dragging the heavy machine gun collapsed, he tied the harness to his own body and prepared to face death together with his gun.

In a fierce battle, about 40 comrades of one platoon, holding a narrow mountain pass, met a tragic end under the cold moonlight.

“Company Commander Kim Hoon!”

With his fierce, blazing eyes, he gave orders in a voice of steel, urging and directing his comrades. His calm judgment and commanding presence were more than enough to hold the entire unit together.

As shells and bullets rained down like a storm, two frightened soldiers tried to abandon their position without orders. Ping! Ping! Piiing! Bullets ripped out of Kim Hoon’s rifle, slicing through the air. The two cowards collapsed to the ground.

Kim Hoon, as if nothing had happened, continued his sharp and fierce command.

During the main force's retreat, several platoon leaders from Kang Hwa-rin’s and Lee Woon-gang’s infantry companies went missing. Their poorly trained platoon members wandered the mountain ridges like lost sheep. They weren’t just isolated; they were completely surrounded by the enemy’s main force.

The only way to save them was to get a message through, instructing them to retreat toward Kim Hoon’s position.

“Who will volunteer as messenger?”

It was a mission where 99 out of 100 would surely die.

“I’ll go.”

Kim Heung-yeol, who had a stubbly mustache under his nose, puffed out his chest and stood up. No sooner had he risen than he dashed down the mountainside.

A single heavy machine gun covered his run for the sake of his little mustache.

But the enemy fire immediately concentrated on him.

Ping! Ping! Rat-a-tat-tat... Whoosh whoosh whoosh...

Countless bullets flew around his mustache. A dozen or so grazed his skin. After running for a while, he suddenly fell and rolled down a cliff. Tumbling, tumbling... he kept rolling downward. He rolled past enemy lines and over the frontlines of enemy fire.

Then, like a bear, the mustached soldier sprang to his feet and darted toward another mountain ridge.

Bullets rained again. He flipped his body and started rolling once more.

After each barrage of bullets, he’d rise and run. When the shooting resumed, he’d drop and roll —roll, run, run and roll—until finally, crawling like a snake, he moved forward.

His whole body was bloodied and covered in wounds.

But in the end, he completed his mission and succeeded in saving the lives of 50 to 60 comrades.

“Kim Sang-ha!” Who would’ve thought that such an innocent, childlike friend would fight with such courage...

An enemy bullet struck his face. His left cheek was torn in two, and his lower jaw was shattered. But he acted like it was nothing, stripped off his shirt, and charged at the enemy.

After throwing every grenade he had, Kim Hoon ordered him to fall back during the rear guard’s retreat.

But he refused to retreat even a step.

With all his strength, he kept throwing grenades, and when he ran out, he grabbed those from fallen comrades and kept hurling them.

At some point, a large moon had risen high in the sky. Eventually, the moon tilted westward, and the darkest hours before dawn swallowed everything in pitch black, like it was dipped in ink.

Under the cover of this deep, shadowy darkness, we withdrew from the front line.

In this battle, the enemy suffered around 1,000 casualties, including their regimental commander Kano, while our side suffered about 100 casualties.

Thirty minutes later, the curtain fell on the covering battle that had supported our retreat.

As we left the battlefield and looked back, a sudden blaze rose violently from beyond the silent trees and mountain ridges of Chui-pyeong. The flames surged so fiercely that they seemed to pierce the sky, staining the night sky red. Like a red demon lashing out with hairy arms, the fire looked ready to consume everything in its path.

We soon realized the fire was devouring the lives, homes, and property of our fellow countrymen —who had no part in this war.

That village of our compatriots would become nothing more than ashes in the frenzy of those raging flames.

Watching it, our hearts filled with both anger and pain. But at the same time, a deep, involuntary sense of remorse overcame us. It was because we felt endless guilt toward those fellow countrymen enduring such unbearable suffering.

"Dear fellow Koreans, please forgive us. Everything we’ve done is for the sake of our homeland."

9. 피 어린 간주곡

9. The Blood-Stained Interlude

In any war, there are always strange and haunting episodes that touch the deepest parts of the human heart... Like a thin and beautiful interlude in the middle of a thunderous symphony, these episodes may seem incidental, but they are often filled with humor and sorrow—sometimes enough to send a chill through the listener.

The Cheongsanri Symphony was no different. Alongside the main melody of the campaign, it, too, had its own short, scattered interludes.

The stories written here belong to that kind of interlude.

On September 7, before the unit began its march, he was joking around with his closest friend from back home, Comrade Yang. As part of the banter, he pointed his rifle—supposedly unloaded—at Yang's head and said,

"If you were a Jap, I'd just… do this," and he pulled the trigger, pretending to shoot.

Bang!

To his absolute horror, a real bullet flew out of the barrel.

Yang collapsed instantly.

The bullet had pierced through his head and exited through his shoulder. It was an unimaginable tragedy—something no one had foreseen. He stood there in shock, staring blankly at the sky. His hands trembled as he checked the magazine. He had completely forgotten he'd loaded a single round earlier. That one bullet had caused the accident.

He was confined. Interrogated.

But no matter how hard they pressed him, it was clearly just an accidental discharge. Nothing more.

It happened the night before the Battle of Cheongsanri.

General Kim Jwa-jin eventually released him and quietly said,

“Who killed Comrade Yang? It wasn’t you. It was the Japanese. Think of yourself as someone who’s been given a second life—fight well, and avenge Comrade Yang.”

For a moment, it was as if everyone had forgotten there was still a prisoner tied up beneath them. A faint, grim light came over his face. He slowly bent down, picked up a rock with his bound hands, and in one sweeping motion smashed the rope. The horse and the captive each fled in opposite directions.

And in the end, he raised his rifle once more and charged into the Cheongsanri battle with a near-maniacal courage. It was as if he had completely lost himself—as if he had erased the memory of killing his own friend by accident. He threw himself into the fight.

But in the end, he did not die.

A Sheet of Paper Apart

Around the time our forces began advancing toward Doiwonping, Comrade Lee Jang-gyu was dispatched as a reconnaissance officer to survey enemy movements near Chungshinjang. While on this mission, he was captured by two enemy soldiers and taken toward their main camp.

Midway through the escort, one of the enemy soldiers felt the urge to relieve himself. He handed the reins and the rope binding the prisoner to his comrade and went off to the side of the road to do his business.

Dusk was already settling in. The man on horseback had his back turned to Lee and was chatting casually with the other soldier. For a moment, it seemed they had completely forgotten about the man tied beneath the horse.

Through the fading twilight, Lee Jang-gyu spotted a large rock at the edge of the road near his feet. Quietly, he bent down and, with his bound hands, managed to grasp the rock and jabbed its sharp edge hard into the soldier’s stomach.

Startled, the horse neighed loudly and reared up. The man riding the horse panicked and dropped both the reins and the rope binding the prisoner. The horse and the prisoner each bolted off in separate directions.

Lee fled into a nearby stream, crossed it, and managed to reach a village populated by ethnic Koreans.

The two enemy cavalrymen barely made it back to their post, but the whereabouts of the escaped prisoner were completely unknown. (A man can't be hunted like a horse.) The enemy soldiers ransacked the village thoroughly, but they couldn’t find any trace of the fugitive.

Eventually, they reached the conclusion that he must be hiding inside one of the tall haystacks piled throughout the village.

These haystacks were massive and densely packed, tucked into every corner of the village. Finding a hidden man among them was like searching for a needle in a haystack—it would require exceptional patience and skill. The two cavalrymen began probing the haystacks one by one with their long military swords, hoping to feel the resistance of a human body.

In truth, Lee Jang-gyu was indeed hiding inside one of those haystacks.

From a distance, he heard the sound of horse hooves growing louder. Closer and closer they came, until suddenly—*thump!*—he heard a sword stab into the very haystack he was hiding in. The blade pushed deeper, piercing toward the center where he lay. His heart pounded so loud it felt deafening.

Finally, the fateful moment came. One of the soldiers, leading his horse, stopped right in front of Lee's haystack—the very one he was hiding in.

"Damn! This haystack's unusually big. Someone might be hiding in here. Let's stab it deep and see!"

Inside, Lee lay perfectly still, arms and legs pulled in, holding his breath. But no matter how hard he tried to stay calm, his heart was pounding louder than ever.

The sword kept coming, inching closer toward the center.

In the pitch-black silence, with no light and no sound, the only thing to be heard was the blade slicing through the straw.

Thwack! Thwack!

Once, the cold steel sliced under his right armpit.

Next, the blade tore through his pants and exited between his legs.

Then it poked through his left armpit and scraped past the soles of his feet.

Dozens of stabs later, still with no reaction, the soldiers gave up and moved to the next haystack.

They searched several more but found nothing. With no results, the cavalrymen spurred their horses and left the village.

Lee Jang-gyu slowly crawled out of the haystack, gasping and shaking, and returned to his unit.

He examined his body and, letting out a crooked grin, said:

“Goddamn it! My forearms, my waist—my whole body’s covered in shallow scrapes… Just a sheet of paper’s difference. If that blade had gone in even a little deeper, I’d have been done for.”

“Look at this! My whole body reeks of glycerin. That bastard must have rubbed it all over me to keep his sword from rusting! That sword probably slipped off me a good dozen times…”

“It was a damn sheet of paper’s difference… Just a sheet of paper.”

At that time, Staff Officer Ja Joong-so was an old warhorse who had made a name for himself by defeating regular Chinese troops in a border clash several years before the Battle of Cheongsanri. He was already well into old age.

He had small, sharp eyes and eyebrows that looked like they’d been shaved off. A sparse mustache clung to the end of his nose, and his face was covered in deep wrinkles, like cracks on an old wooden mask.

No one had ever seen him laugh heartily or shed a tear. He was a man of icy temperament.

Long ago, he too had a happy family—a warm home. But his stern character couldn’t remain buried in that dreamlike happiness for long.

"In the end, he cast everything aside and joined our army, choosing to embrace the harsh cold and hunger… like a man jumping headfirst into a raging whirlpool."

Around the time the Battle of Baiyuanping began, he should have withdrawn earlier along with the unit under General Kim Jwa-jin’s command. After the battle started, the enemy’s vanguard unit was annihilated in the forest near Gongja, and then the enemy’s main force launched a large-scale assault, leading to a fierce back-and-forth engagement.

At that moment, one of my students, Kang Wi, started to shrink back in fear under the hail of enemy shells. He was quietly retreating, inching toward a cave to hide. I shouted loudly three times, “Kang Wi, come out!” But he gave no answer.

Just as I was about to fire my pistol at him in fury—suddenly, a large trembling hand grabbed my hand tightly.

I turned my head toward the owner of that hand.
“Oh! Sir, what are you doing here? I thought you had already withdrawn with General Kim. This is no place for you to be. Can’t you hear how fierce the shelling is? There’s no reason for someone of your age to suffer through this…”

At my words, he gently shook his white-haired head, then suddenly his face turned red and, with a tone full of emotion, he replied:

“No. I’ll stay here with you! I want to be with you and see, with my own eyes, those enemies fall one by one before the Korean people!”

4. The old soldier would rather vanish than disgrace himself.

Sergeant Han Dong-ji of the infantry was 43 years old and had served as a "First-Class Private" during the final days of old Korea. He was always proud of that title and often boasted about it. Because of this, his comrades gave him the nickname “First-Class Han.” Indeed, “First-Class Han” was exceptionally brave and never brought shame to the honor of the soldiers of old Korea.

After the battle at Marukko-u ended, our unit began retreating toward Rautokko-u. “First-Class Han,” still caught up in the excitement of shooting at the enemy, failed to keep up with the rest of the unit.

Left behind in the dark forest were only the moon and “First-Class Han.” He wandered alone through the woods and eventually disappeared into the shadows. By the time the morning light began to break, the entire forest was blanketed in thick, endless fog. As he marched with his rifle slung over his shoulder, circling through the mist, he heard the faint sound of human voices in the distance. The sound gradually grew louder and closer. Mixed within it was clearly the harsh tone of Japanese voices.

Bang, bang, bang!
He fired ferociously in the direction of the voices.

The enemy troops pursuing us were startled by the unexpected gunfire. Remembering their painful defeat in the Baiyuanping forest clearing, the enemy suspected our main force might be lying in ambush just ahead. They slowed their advance, broke formation, and began carefully searching the area.

“First-Class Han” was never seen again. But thanks to his lone effort, he delayed the enemy’s pursuit, buying us valuable time.

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5. Who could dare not honor such a death?

Comrade Kang, 18 years old, who had suffered a leg injury during the Battle of Cheongsanri, and comrade Cha, a middle-aged man with a fractured collarbone, were hiding in the home of Kang’s cousin in the Korean-Chinese village of Dtaomukko-u. They were receiving treatment there.

After two weeks, their wounds began to heal, and the life that had been fading slowly started to return. But during this time, the enemy launched a massive slaughter campaign in Manchuria. It was a retaliatory massacre aimed at punishing the innocent Korean diaspora for the blood the independence army had spilled. This campaign was unimaginably brutal and widespread.

In Jilin and Liangwuning alone, two cities with significant Korean populations, approximately **30,000 people** were massacred, many of them gunned down without any resistance.

The wave of this slaughter finally reached Dtaomukko-u, the village where Kang and Cha were in hiding.

Armed with pistols and sabers, enemy soldiers stormed into the house where Kang was hidden. They kicked the door open—it gave way instantly.

The moment the door opened, their eyes were drawn to two corpses lying on the floor. Each body had a deep stab wound in the neck, still gushing fresh, hot blood. The warmth of the blood showed that their deaths had occurred just moments earlier.

Wounds still visible on their legs and sides confirmed that they had been members of the Korean Independence Army.

The Japanese soldiers who witnessed the scene straightened their uniforms and solemnly bowed their heads. Who could fail to pay respects to such noble deaths?

We must give them the respectful burial they deserve. And those who dare to insult their surviving family members—we will not forgive them. If anyone dares to harm even a single soul in Dtaomukko-u, we **will not** let it go.

10. This Record

After two days and two nights of fierce fighting, the Battle of Cheongsanri came to an end.

According to compiled reports, the enemy mobilized a massive force: two full divisions stationed in Korea, plus elements from three divisions of the Siberian Expeditionary Army, amounting to roughly five full divisions of regular troops — over 50,000 soldiers. On top of that, they deployed an air squadron and called in police forces stationed across Jiandao. The scale was overwhelming.

On the other hand, our total force — including non-combat personnel — numbered only about 2,800. This means that on average, each Korean independence fighter faced 20 Japanese soldiers.

Enemy casualties totaled over 3,300, including their commander, Colonel Kanō. Our losses were around 60 killed, 90 wounded, and over 200 missing (though most of the missing later rejoined the unit). In essence, each Korean soldier took down an average of 20 enemy soldiers — a remarkable ratio.

This was a virtually unprecedented result in world military history.
And it was a victory only made possible by the unique terrain of Manchuria — endless forests and towering mountains.

What gave us the victory?
It was the searing humiliation of ten years of national ruin that burned into our bones.
It was the presence of brilliant young officers and students in our ranks.
It was our unyielding offensive spirit.
It was the passionate support and cooperation of the local villagers.
It was our light clothing and soft shoes, which allowed us to move quickly.
It was our deep familiarity with the terrain.
It was our fighting spirit, stronger than the enemy's.
It was our superior command and leadership.
It was the enemy's passive stance.
It was the fact that their heavy overcoats and leather boots were ill-suited for mountain warfare.
It was the people's bitter hatred toward the cruel enemy.

11. Conclusion

The Japanese newspapers reported the Battle of Cheongsanri as front-page headline news:

"… Among our fallen soldiers were one regimental commander, Colonel Kanō, two battalion commanders, five company commanders, nine platoon leaders, and over 900 soldiers of lower rank…"

A well-known literary scholar also published an article titled, *"Who Exactly Is Kim Jwa-jin?"*

Having suffered a humiliating defeat in the Battle of Cheongsanri, the "Imperial Army" went on to launch brutal attacks against unarmed Korean civilians, seeking a hollow victory by slaughtering the defenseless. This led to the **Gando Massacre**, where the Japanese army carried out a large-scale killing campaign in the cities of Ryakunin (略寧) and Jilin, murdering over 30,000 innocent Korean farmers.

The bloodshed continued without end.
Even today, the mountains and fields of Cheongsanri likely remain unchanged, just as they were back then.
Only near the clearing in the forest, where over a thousand bodies once lay, stands a lone and desolate **soul memorial**, cold and silent.

Every day, every year, the crimson rays of the sun — as if from the emperor himself — quietly stroke those deep blue inscriptions.

(The inscription reads: "To the souls of the Japanese soldiers killed in the subjugation of the unruly Koreans, October, 9th year of Taishō." The "October" here refers to the solar calendar; the "September" mentioned earlier in this text refers to the lunar calendar.)

12. A Historical Truth That Cannot Be Tarnished — A Matter of National Pride

The widely known Battle of Cheongsanri was the only large-scale, organized military campaign against Japan since the fall of our nation. It was a rare victory in world military history — a battle where a small number of poorly equipped Korean troops destroyed thousands of enemies many times their size.

This is a historical fact we can proudly and forever boast of, a source of national pride.

The bloody battle that took place on Mount Baekdu, in the Jangbaeksan region of Manchuria, felt to me like a divine blessing bestowed by the wisdom of *Josan* (an archaic term for Korea). History tells us that our ancestors fought the Jurchens and other northern tribes in this region for over 500 years. Goguryeo also fought defensive wars here against the Sui and Tang dynasties — and won.

At the time of Cheongsanri, I was 21 years old — a passionate young man fighting in what became the most decisive resistance battle of my life. And we won. But as a people, who never even got a proper chance to vent our sorrow after losing our country, we cannot simply say, *"We won big thanks to the wisdom of Jangbaeksan,"* and leave it at that. There remains a deep void within us that cannot be filled so easily. That's what makes this so precious.

If this undeniable truth is distorted by flawed records or falsified documents, leading future generations to question or doubt this history, it would be an immeasurable regret — a painful tragedy.

Even so, I placed my trust in the national conscience and common sense — that we would not be misled by the enemy's distorted documents or fabricated records created by pseudo-historians chasing fleeting fame.

But seeing how many false narratives have emerged since liberation — stories that only mock the literate — I've come to feel that perhaps it is my duty to offer a more detailed testimony before I die.

That's why I must speak now.

I heard from the director of the National Assembly Library, who visited the United States last year, that when he was at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., he found a vast collection of materials — weapons seized by the Japanese from Korean independence fighters during the Cheongsanri battle, along with various documents and records. He copied all of it and brought it back.

Those records had originally been kept by the Japanese Ministry of the Army and the General Staff Headquarters immediately after their defeat, but were confiscated by U.S. forces after Japan's surrender and transferred to Washington.

I had long intended to visit and examine them someday. One day, while meeting with a few members of the National Assembly, I mentioned these photos and documents. They commented, *"Seeing this makes us realize how much damage our independence army must have suffered back then."*

Before I go further, I must touch on an important point about our national character and political nature — to make the historical context clearer.

Consider how, during the U.S. military government and the U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission period after liberation, dozens of political parties were formed overnight as soon as the phrase *"we will engage with political organizations"* was announced. That alone reveals something fundamental about our national temperament.

The Korean diaspora community in Manchuria, which had formed the foundation of the independence movement, wasn't much different from today's Republic of Korea — a smaller version, perhaps.

There were certainly excellent patriot-led organizations with strong leadership and conviction. But on the other hand, many loosely formed groups sprang up without solid beliefs — formed in a moment of emotional impulse or opportunism. These ragtag bands were no small number.

At that time, Manchuria had an overwhelming number of these **XX Societies** and **XX Armies**, to the point that it was astonishing. The difference in quality among them was stark. Some groups, regrettably, did little more than torment fellow Koreans, and were seen by the public as no better than local thugs.

Until now, I hesitated to speak about this — out of fear that I might disillusion younger generations.

Those people are all gone now. Their descendants have grown up, taking pride in the accomplishments of their forebears and becoming part of the nation's core.

I feared that reopening these old wounds, criticizing the past too bluntly, would seem inappropriate or too bitter. That's why I held back.

Just before the Battle of Cheongsanri, around the lunar calendar's 11th day of September, the enemy began surrounding us with massive forces. Four independence groups sent representatives to the Northern Route Military Administration Office to propose a joint operation.

From what I remember, the five groups that ultimately formed the alliance were: the National Association (Gukminhoe), the Righteous Army Command (Uigunbu), the Korean People's Association of Hunchun, the Righteous People's Corps, and the Northern Route Military Administration Office.

The original purpose of building an independence army was to defeat the Japanese military. We all rallied around that mission. Now, the perfect opportunity had arrived — a once-in-a-lifetime chance. That's why we agreed to join forces under a common cause.

From the Gukminhoe (National Association), Hong Beom-do and Ahn Mu brought troops, and from the Uigunbu (Righteous Army Command), Choi Jin-dong and others arrived with their forces on the night of the 8th. The Gukminhoe troops arrived the earliest, and the Uigunbu brought about 200 men, while the Hanmindan had about a company-sized force. The Uiincheon (Justice Corps), which originally never had more than 200 troops, only sent a few of their more adventurous members.

On the 8th, a strategy meeting was held. General Kim Jwa-jin was appointed as overall commander, with Hong Beom-do and Choi Myeong-rok as deputy commanders. I, as the leader of the travel party, was appointed front-line commander, i.e., battle commander. Additionally, Hong Beom-do's unit was assigned to Duseogou, the Uigunbu to Musan and the Gando Valley, and the Gunjeongseo troops were assigned to the Songrim-pyeong area in the central region.

However, by the dawn of the 9th, we found that some groups had left without any notice. Only one company of Hanmindan troops remained. The three organizations had vanished without a word, taking their rice rations and supplies with them.

I later learned that they were dissatisfied with the division of roles and responsibilities. While that might be true, I believe they were actually overwhelmed by the strength of the enemy and had lost the will to fight.

As a result, Gunjeongseo abandoned its original battlefield plan in Songrim-pyeong and retreated into the narrow inner region of Cheongsan-ri, north of Baekun-pyeong, a more advantageous area suitable for small forces.

After our surprise attack at Cheonsupyeong at dawn, I reviewed a report from Captain Shimada, which mentioned that the enemy on Marukou Hill was under surveillance. However, the situation was unclear. It wasn't until the Marumou battle that we confirmed Hong Beom-do's unit had camped there.

On the third day after Hong Beom-do's unit broke away, they were surrounded by the Japanese army. They couldn't even drink a sip of water or light a single fire during the cold night, and they endured their fate by huddling and shivering in silence. Then, when our forces launched a surprise attack at Cheonsupyeong and broke through the Japanese encirclement, the enemy who had surrounded Hong Beom-do's unit was also forced to pull back. Had Hong Beom-do's unit responded to the situation and joined the counterattack, the outcome would have been far better. But they saw the opening as a stroke of luck and chose to continue retreating toward Ando-hyeon.

As they passed through the narrow valleys of Udoyangchang, they were once again caught in a Japanese encirclement. The enemy pursued them persistently. Unaware of this, the unit continued to shiver and hide in the mountains for several days, believing they were finally safe and had left the battlefield. That night, they lit large bonfires to warm themselves and cook food, but the pursuing Japanese army unleashed a barrage of automatic fire and artillery. In an instant, over a hundred men were massacred without any chance to resist. They also lost about half of their weapons. The remaining survivors, carrying what weapons they had left, retreated into a place called Naedosan. The weapons that the Japanese army later claimed to have seized from the Independence Army after the Cheongsan-ri campaign were in fact taken from this group.

Mr. Hong Beom-do had originally been a righteous army fighter from the Gapsan gold mine area and was an illiterate man who couldn't even write his name. But he was a patriot and a useful fighter, often ambushing Japanese police stations and outposts and achieving significant success in guerrilla warfare. After coming to Manchuria, he reorganized into an Independence Army after the March 1st Movement. Because he was well known and elderly, the Gukminhoe honored him by appointing him as Commander-in-Chief. Unfortunately, many of the younger Gukminhoe officials were corrupt and abusive. Although it had the broadest base of public support, the organization lost much of its credibility due to their misconduct. Later, the majority of the early communist group Jeokgidang in North Manchuria was composed of former Gukminhoe officials who had moved over. They used their former public base to establish communist cells. Key figures included Kim Gang, Choi Gye-rim, and Ma Chung-geol.

Back to the story — the Gukminhoe army disbanded, and some of its weapons were buried, only to be dug up later due to local civilian reports to the Japanese. Hong Beom-do, who had led a

unit made up of his fellow old righteous army comrades, suffered a major blow and, realizing the gravity of the situation, handed over the remaining weapons to General Ji Cheong-cheon, who led the cadets of the Shinheung Military Academy. With this, Ji Cheong-cheon's unit was finally armed.

I also want to clarify a common misconception: contrary to popular belief, General Ji Cheong-cheon did not directly participate in the Cheongsan-ri campaign. That is completely false.

Together with me, he had trained about 300 students at Shinheung School using only wooden rifles. After the Cheongsan-ri campaign, Ji Cheong-cheon led those students from Southern Manchuria through Baekdu Mountain and Ando-hyeon into Naedosan. About three months after the Cheongsan-ri campaign, the scattered Independence Army units, including the Gunjeongseo forces and others, regrouped in Milsan, reorganized as the "Daehan Independence Army," and crossed over into Russia.

There are three key points that must be clearly stated.

First, General Hong Beom-do attempted to participate in the Battle of Cheongsan-ri but ultimately withdrew and acted independently, which led to him suffering a major defeat.

Second, the frequently repeated claim in historical materials that General Ji Cheong-cheon was involved in the Battle of Cheongsan-ri is far from the truth. He never took part in that battle.

Third, the weapons photographed by the Japanese were the very weapons that had been collectively abandoned by Hong Beom-do's unit. Also, in the midst of the fierce battles, some of the Military Administration Army (Gunjeongseo) soldiers were either killed or went missing, and it seems likely that some of their weapons also ended up in Japanese hands. However, the Military Administration Army never collapsed organizationally, nor did they collectively surrender or give up their weapons to the Japanese.

Later, when Hong Beom-do and his army crossed into the Russian city of Iman, he was persuaded by members of the Irkutsk faction of the Russian Communist Party to become a Communist Party member. But in reality, he had no role or responsibilities there—he essentially just lent his name. Afterward, he wandered near the town of Blagoveshchensk in the Free City area, where he fell ill and died tragically.

In addition, there are the names of people who never even came near the independence army or heard a single gunshot from the Japanese, yet they appear prominently in records of the independence movement—records compiled by the Japanese using information gathered through espionage. Since I am not responsible for that, I will refrain from mentioning them further here.

Mu-jeon!
That was the name of the horse I loved more than anything else in the world.

After suffering a crushing defeat in battle and returning to Yeonggotap in disgrace, the only comfort I had left was that one horse. I was emaciated, reduced to a body with no strength or

purpose. But through Mu-jeon's eyes, I could still feel everything I had lost. The warmth in those innocent eyes would, at times, spark unexpected flames in my chest.

In the Tomsk highlands of Russia, the Far East was known for producing many great horses. Mu-jeon was one of them. His spirit, as if ready to conquer the vast land beneath his hooves, seemed capable of sweeping across the endless plains like a storm wind. That's why I fell in love with Mu-jeon at first sight.
No love given to a person could surpass the pure, unbetraying love I felt for that horse. It remains one of the most painful yet cherished memories in my heart.

Mu-jeon's build—six ja and two chi tall (about 6.5 feet), towering and sturdy—was unmatched across all of Siberia. When he raised his head toward the sky, my nearly six-foot frame had to stretch its legs, reach up with a fully extended arm, just to barely touch the thick hair under his chin.

A dense, armored mane began at the top of his head and stopped at his elevated shoulder blades, which bulged with pronounced muscle under a broad chest. His legs stood firm and straight, his hindquarters lowered just enough to be perfectly angled, his rear legs taut with muscular tension. All of this made it clear: I was utterly captivated by Mu-jeon.

When he raised his head, ears pointed forward, gazing out across the wilderness, I found him unbearably beautiful. His overwhelming majesty, combined with his elegant physique and the pride that swelled in his chest, gave me a profound sense of awe whenever I stood beside him.

Because of his unusually large frame, people said anyone who rode Mu-jeon needed a stepping stone. But with the agility I'd trained through light cavalry drills, I felt the exhilaration of mounting him without assistance, just vaulting onto him in one smooth motion.

When the early morning air blanketed the vast steppe like water across a wide lake, Mu-jeon's large nostrils would flare, breaking the still silence of the land. When he inhaled deeply into his chest and grew lighter on his feet, a gleam would flash in his eyes.

It was a majestic kind of music. Truly, it was.
He lifted his head and walked with what looked like arrogant swagger, but his rhythmic Spanish gait carried a grace and tempo of its own.

As his steel-like hooves moved one after another across the ground, the angle of his steps would shift from 180 degrees to 90 degrees, then back and forth again, rising and falling—like waves on the sea. That was the moment forward movement truly began.

One-two… one-two…

When Mu-jeon walked in that dignified, deliberate posture, he was no longer a four-legged animal—he was a marching symphony. The motion of his legs created music like oars stirring the air. Each four-step sequence felt like a bar of a grand marching composition passing by. At those moments, Mu-jeon, myself, and nature all moved in perfect harmony.

In those moments, Mu-jeon looked as if the whole world were illuminated by the rhythm of his hooves. He exuded a kind of lovely pride. And with those round, spirited eyes, he seemed fully aware of it too.
It was this proud, dignified Mu-jeon that allowed me to overcome my despair and find strength again.

Whenever Mu-jeon ran like lightning and leapt over obstacles in front of a crowd, I felt my heart expand, as if it would burst open. When he shot his head forward like an arrow, ears pricked and his long neck mane flowing backward like a wave, his sleek black tail would stiffen like a bundle of steel wires. From head to ears, neck to tail, he would stretch into a perfect line, and his four hooves would strike the ground like flying arrows—**whish, whish**—kicking up wind as he soared over barriers.

Each time this happened, his large, imposing body would seem to fly through the air, carried by the wind.

The red coat that blanketed his lithe body looked like a mass of fire burning bright.
And when he ran even faster, the flames would flicker and scatter through the air.
Twisting and leaping, one burst after another, they spread like wildfire.
Whenever Mu-jeon ran, it was as if the entire training ground would ignite in an instant with brilliant flames.

After the demonstration run was over, a gust of wind swept over the track like it was ready to leave, and dust blanketed the field. The jockey dismounted, brushing his clothes off, and gently stroked the horse with a soft touch. Then, as usual, he popped a few sugar cubes—the kind you put in coffee—into the horse's mouth. Before he knew it, giving sugar cubes had become a habit. Ever since the horse first tasted sweetness, it had begun to run much better in every race, as if expecting its treat at the end. It clearly believed the sugar was coming.

On days without demonstrations, if Mujeon wanted sugar, he would close his lips and tilt his head in a pleading expression. Sometimes, he would nudge at the pocket of my military coat with his mouth, gently tugging at it with his teeth. In every way, Mujeon was an extraordinary horse. His physique was as exceptional as his strength. He could pull a sled loaded with over 2,000 geun (around 1.2 tons)—the work of three regular horses. At full power, he could run fifty li (around 20 kilometers) per hour for over five hours. In a day and a night, he could easily cover five to six hundred li (around 200 kilometers), showing incredible endurance. He could even leap over walls as high as two meters in a single bound.

This one-of-a-kind horse, Mujeon, was one I had come across by chance on the Siberian battlefield and bought for 1,800 rubles. But now, I had fallen so far that I couldn't even afford the five won it cost to buy 40 geun of oats each day. That worry gnawed at me more and more each day. Unless I fed him 40 geun of oats, along with a certain amount of dry grass and salt every day, I couldn't expect him to maintain his strength—and now I couldn't even manage that. My own condition had become miserable.

For a warhorse raised on the battlefield, to be discarded just because the war had ended—it felt like a cruel joke, a tragic irony.

"I should at least find Mujeon a good new owner..."
Worrying over his future, I finally tried to cool my emotions and came to that conclusion.

But even that decision couldn't stay firm in my heart for long. The moment overwhelming sorrow surged up from inside me, my whole body would start trembling uncontrollably.

"To part from Mujeon... I can't. I just can't do it."
Even as I clenched my fist in frustration, I couldn't bring myself to leave the horse. I just kept circling around, again and again, unable to tear myself away. I must have looked like someone drunk, wearing a dazed expression.

Looking back, the life I lived over the past four years with Mujeon had become inseparable from my own. It was a chapter of my life I could never forget—the memory of one man and his horse.

Nearly everything I did revolved around Mujeon. It might sound exaggerated, but it's true: my bond with Mujeon ran as deep as the sea. When I threw myself into the flames of revolution, when I galloped across the desolate Siberian wilderness, when I clung to Mujeon's back charging through the barrage of artillery fire and danced on the razor's edge between life and death—Mujeon was the only one I could trust.

In combat, the golden rule for infantry facing cavalry was to shoot the horse first, not the rider—so horses were always the main targets, suffering far more under the wrath of death than men. But not once did Mujeon ever cower or lower his head in fear.

Back then, I was leading a Cossack cavalry unit—legendary for its horsemanship and skill. Yet, whenever I charged forward on Mujeon, our unity in speed and bravery would outshine even the Cossacks. They couldn't help but lower their heads in awe.

Together, Mujeon and I had brought the finest Cossack traditions to their brightest glory.

But those memories became a source of burning jealousy. The thought that someone other than me might become Mujeon's owner—that someone else might ride him—felt like a betrayal. It was more humiliating and painful than imagining a lover in another man's arms.

So I clenched my teeth like a madman and shouted:

"No! No way! Me, abandon Mujeon? Never. I *won't* give him up. I *can't*!"

But the reality of providing 40 geun of oats every day weighed heavily on me.

Wandering around Youngkotap Street, I was little different from a stateless vagrant. I was crashing in the spare room of a friend's house, and Mujeon was barely managing to stay dry

under the eaves of their gate. I couldn't avoid reaching out for help, begging my friend—up to ten times—for fodder.

I spent every day wandering the streets, resting my legs by watching the green current of the Mokdan River flowing eastward.

Each morning, the sun would rise from the eastern horizon, and each evening it would set in the west. I stared blankly at the river reflecting that glow, feeling waves of homesickness swell within me. But no matter how long I watched the water, not a single grain of oats came floating down the Mokdan River. No matter how much I roamed the busy streets of Youngkotap, I couldn't find a scrap of feed left unclaimed. There wasn't a single pile of grass anywhere that a horse could eat.

Then one night, late in autumn, under a foreign sky—a pale moon soaked in the cold stillness spilled a hazy shimmer over the land. A chill wind crept into my chest as if trying to squeeze my heart tight. Even the stars seemed to fall in clusters from the heavens. On that night, amidst the endless expanse and drifting cloud patterns, the cry of a night bird echoed in the air. It stirred something inside me, suddenly and powerfully.

It felt like I had just drunk freshly squeezed pomegranate juice — a cold, hollow energy wrapped around my body. I walked over to the horse. A long shadow followed me. It was quite late into the night. Maybe it was the feeling that this parting with Mujŏn would be final and unavoidable that made me step outside the main gate. I had been tossing and turning in bed, caught in aimless thoughts, and that night, I couldn't stand it anymore and dragged myself out. *Rustle, rustle, rustle!* That was the sound of Mujŏn chewing on dry weeds. When I approached, Mujŏn immediately stopped chewing and seemed to recognize my footsteps as those of his master.

Still, it was a pleasant sound to hear.
"Hmph, you sweet thing… how pitiful…" I said, feigning ignorance and softly called out, "Mujŏn?"

I stopped walking in front of the gate and listened carefully. The horse snorted for a while, and when he realized no one was there and heard no more footsteps, he seemed disappointed and resumed chewing on the dry grass.

I quietly stepped inside the stable. Mujŏn, as if startled, kept the hay in his mouth but neighed several times in delight.
"Hey, you rascal!"

I ran my fingers through the thick mane on his neck and gently patted the sturdy skin around it a couple of times. The scent of hay carried on his breath was as fragrant to me as champagne. The moonlight, pale like a jade skirt, seeped through the gaps in the earthen wall. The space near the main gate was faded under the bright moonlight. In that glow, I quietly looked into Mujŏn's face.

Maybe it was because of his large size, but his way of welcoming his master was different from that of a dog. The affection radiating from his big frame felt reliable. His eyes, which seemed

both simple and loyal, gave off the subtle expression of a modest woman looking lovingly at her husband.

He flicked his ears and shook his neck, and his thick, lush mane rippled under the moonlight. Almost as if to show off his mane, he shifted his four hooves and rubbed his head against my chest. He bit into the hay, then looked back up at me again… His behavior was both endearing and heartbreaking.

Rustle, rustle — snort, snort!

In the hay basket woven from thin wire, there was still fresh green grass that had never been rained on. All Mujŏn had to do was lower his head, and he could easily eat it. But instead of being interested in the feed, he seemed restless, bored, not knowing what to do with himself.

The sound of Mujŏn chewing hay always brought back memories of the past for me.

It was from the days when I roamed the battlefields of Siberia.

In a large stable, dozens of military horses were tied. As the night deepened, all sorts of sounds would quiet down, and the only thing one could hear was the steady rustling — *rustle, rustle* — that sounded like fierce rain pattering against dry tree leaves. Sometimes it would start with a sudden rustle, then slow down and continue through the night. On those nights, by dawn, the hay baskets would be empty, and even the frantic chewing would stop.

Whenever I stood in front of the stable during the sound of that rain-like rustling, there was always one horse among the many that would stop chewing and let out a loud snort of joy.

Every time, I would bring a lantern closer, curious to see which one it was — and without fail, it was always Mujŏn. When that happened, I'd be filled with happiness.

Then I'd let myself be carried away by that rustling sound, as if listening to music, and stand there all night long, drifting off into sleep.

The large callus the size of a duck egg on Mujŏn's right hind leg caught the moonlight. That too brought back memories. The more I thought about Mujŏn, the more those memories filled my mind, and I could almost transform my sorrow by reminiscing.

It happened during one of the fiercest and bloodiest battles of the war.

It was one of those nights when you couldn't even see your five fingers. My cavalry unit, just 27 men, was surrounding and closing in on more than 150 enemies. An enemy bullet flew in and shattered the binoculars hanging from my waist, and another struck Mujŏn's right hind leg, shattering the bone. The bone pierced through the flesh at the exact spot where that callus remains.

Even after he fully recovered, the callus hardened and never went away.

It was a mark of great honor — a truly glorious wound.

Let me say it again: the bond between me and Mujŏn wasn't something that could be compared to human love. I had never once thought of our connection in terms of a man-and-animal relationship. It was something even more profound.

It was, I'd say, a union of souls — a work of art in synchronization.

As if our bloodstreams were intertwined, our movements were so perfectly in sync in all the battles we fought together, they felt like the seamless harmony of an orchestra.

Though the standard principle was that cavalry charges were conducted during the day, in familiar terrain and under certain conditions, we had to ride into enemy lines under cover of night.

Even galloping in pitch-black fields with my sword drawn, Mujŏn never once lost direction or tripped. Not once.

Why was that?

I believe it was because my spirit had seeped deep into his veins, and my wisdom and love pulsed through his body.

While recalling all the days I had spent with Mujŏn, suddenly I came to my senses and realized the rustling had stopped.

I looked up and saw that the hay basket was already empty, and Mujŏn was tapping his front hooves against the ground.

Filled with affection, I gently scolded him and said:

"Just eat it all, damn it!" I said as I poured the last of the nearly finished precious feed, which I had carefully set aside in one corner, into the feedbag, then tied the end of it around the horse's neck. "Here! Eat your fill, you bastard! There aren't many days left to feed you like this anyway!" Almost as if I was letting out some frustration all at once, I spoke bluntly without realizing it.

Whether the horse understood my tone or not, it greedily devoured the unexpected feed until its mouth was full. As if to show gratitude to its owner, it rubbed its ear against my chest. That was always what it did when it felt satisfied. And that was a unique habit I only ever saw in Mu-jeon.

I stared quietly at the horse. Suddenly, the horse looked back at me. Under the loosened moonlight, our four eyes met and tangled together, and it felt like our souls were shrinking and merging into one.

Mu-jeon bent its strong neck down, violently rubbing the feedbag against the ground and swallowing every last bit of the feed near its ears. After making chewing noises for a while, it quietly raised its head. But at that moment, I couldn't understand what was flowing down my face. Parting was also a kind of fate.

There was a man I knew well named Jeong Gwan-seok who farmed in Mokryeong-hyun. That winter, he was struggling so much with poverty that he told me if he could just borrow a horse, he could get a job transporting lumber for some Russian timber company and earn a decent wage. So I decided to lend him my horse for the entire winter, hoping that way I could at least solve the horse feed problem a little bit day by day.

The place where the timber was cut was a deep valley in Tamakou Pass, well known as part of the pristine forest of Manchuria. The valley was filled with white poplar trees so thick and tall that it felt like the sky itself might collapse under their weight. In some places, the logs were hundreds of feet long, and there were two or three beautiful pine flags planted as markers.

These white poplar trees were known for being extremely flammable, so the lumber company would cut the big trunks into just the right size and send them to the matchstick company, where they'd be finely split into tiny matchsticks.

Beneath Tamakou Mountain, the water flowed fiercely in a winding stream called Mokryeong-hara. But in winter, the riverbed froze completely solid, turning into a well-packed, wide, and sturdy silver road—like a highway of ice.

The cut timber was loaded onto this frozen river and transported downstream. The horses that pulled the logs had to walk on the ice, so they wore special iron shoes shaped like saw blades (called "maepyeonja" or horse iron shoes).

These sawblade-like spikes would dig into the ice with every step to prevent slipping. When I thought about Mu-jeon struggling on that long stretch of icy road, I couldn't help but sigh.

Mu-jeon was stubborn… He had never done that kind of work before.
But the harsh reality left no choice. To help Jeong, a poor farmer, there was no other way. First and foremost, Mu-jeon had to keep his own life going.

"Though you're borrowing the horses, I'm not asking for them as payment. Even if I have noble status, I won't go that far," I said. "But you must keep one condition absolutely: never let Mu-jeon go hungry. Don't overwork him or wear him down. You know this is not an ordinary request. You'll get plenty of other horses. I can easily pay you an extra twenty or thirty won a day. So, you must feed him well, no matter what."

When I made this condition to Jeong Gwan-seok while lending the horses, he just said not to worry.
"Of course! Don't get worked up over it! I'll feed him well, as much as he needs."

So Mu-jeon was taken away, and I deliberately avoided watching him being dragged off.

That obedient, reddish-brown horse stayed vivid in my mind, and in the deep night, the sound of him chewing grass in the rain faintly echoed in my ears. I developed a certain emptiness that I couldn't quite fill.

The empty hands, once so skilled at handling the reins, had become useless—just opening and closing with no purpose. A lazy itch played in my palm, and the legs, so used to resting against the horse's side, seemed to lose strength little by little.

Mu-jeon wasn't just abandoned during the war; he was even deserted by the horse he loved. Standing in front of the big gate, deep into the night, I felt lonely. Far away, the place my thoughts ran to was the deep forest of white poplar, the snowy Tamakou mountain valley. That place was crossed by the icy black dragon river's frozen surface, stretching endlessly white.

Even there, the rooster announced the dawn. With the crowing ringing out, the workers went into the mountains, carefully cutting and piling the white poplar wood. They loaded it onto sleds tied to horses and set the horses between two poles (called 'nugak'—to prevent heavy loads from pressing on the horses' shoulders, they placed curved wooden bars over their backs). This was called 'jangsik.' It measured about the width of the horse's shoulders and was firmly secured between the poles. This setup allowed the horses to use their front legs for strength, reducing the burden of the load.

Then with a long whip, the handlers cracked it sharply in the air, and the horses ran on the ice, starting the busy work of hauling white poplar logs downstream.

When you combine all the people working in the mountains and the timber haulers, there were over a thousand. In winter, the valley would be filled with the sounds of tree cutting, workers shouting, and horses neighing, creating a loud, bustling noise.

The echo of sounds blending in the mountain valley, combined with the unique natural sounds of the forest, made a mysterious chorus. It was similar to the sounds of ice cracking and melting on the Russian Volga River or the rhythmic, rich singing of the famous Volga boatmen.

In Alaska or Greenland, dogs usually pull sleds on snow and ice, but here horses were harnessed to sleds. Wherever humans dealt with animals, cruelty was the same. Forcing the horses to wear wooden yokes ('to-beo,' shoulder harnesses) was like putting a noose around their necks, damaging their dignity and spirit.

After wearing the yoke, it was as if the horse was crucified, its spirit nailed down and crushed. How agonizing and monotonous those endless days must have been for the horses—trudging through snow, white poplar forests, and frozen rivers, all the same day after day. The poor horses were worn out, and so were the handlers like Jeong Gwan-seok, struggling to endure the hardship.

Could Mu-jeon endure all this? Just thinking about it tightened my chest painfully. Mu-jeon, who never once suffered from the whip's cruelty before, was now tormented daily. The image of him enduring that humiliation after leaving me was unbearable.

Whenever these thoughts came, my whole body tightened, and I would feel like embracing my own pain and suffering. It was also accompanied by regret and guilt—that I was the cause of Mu-jeon's suffering.

As this bitterness and remorse grew deeper, the winter around Younggotap slowly began to fade. Soon the feeling of spring started to spread.

While my heart was trapped in grief, nature was gradually healing. The sunlight grew warmer with the change of seasons, and the thick layers of snow and ice in the mountains—seemingly permanent—melted surprisingly quickly, flowing down as countless streams and waterfalls, rushing lower and lower.

It was a marvelous flow of seasons, a true wonder of nature.

The thick layers of ice that had frozen tightly together gradually melted under the soft breeze, becoming transparent little by little until finally revealing the water beneath. It was like a woman peeling off layer after layer of her white ice-like clothing. The way the dancing woman shed her silver clothes one layer at a time was no different at all.

When chunks of ice floated down the frozen surface of the valley floor in early spring, horses could no longer walk on it. Naturally, all the noisy sounds quieted down one by one, and the valley grew calm again.

It must have been around February. I received a notice from Jeong Gwansuk that a messenger would be sent to me. I remember that day clearly — an early spring day with gloomy, overcast skies. Outside the Yeonggotap temple, where the sun was nowhere to be seen, the landscape looked bleak like a desert. Everywhere I looked, there were only old earthenware jars and rusted old guns. On the south-facing hills, the snow had melted to reveal wet dirt, while the shaded places still held dirty patches of snow, giving the appearance of a desolate desert.

It was very different from the countryside of my hometown in spring, where birds sang and butterflies danced. Instead, thousands upon thousands of black crows were flying noisily around. These crows were not afraid of people. They would fly low, wagging their tails, and loudly caw with their black beaks. Their cries often ruined the hopeful feeling of spring. Occasionally, one or two hawks would circle high in the sky, silently gliding, unlike the crows.

The mountains were low and barely visible, stretching endlessly. From afar, they looked like thousands of horses running and resting, grazing and wandering. There were broad-leaved evergreen trees even in winter, turning green in summer and glowing red in winter.

At that moment, the mountains under the gloomy sky looked distant and sad, blending with the horizon.

The market was barely visible far away, and nearby was a small village with only a few houses. This was known as the village where the large landowners lived. Around the village, there was a tall, thick, ocher-colored earthen wall surrounding it, with watchtowers placed at intervals. On one tower, a long bamboo pole was stuck into a tall roof tile (the largest kind of tile used as a weapon barrel in old muskets). At the end of the pole, a bright red handkerchief was tied high as a symbol of victory to ward off enemies.

This was a kind of flag, always displayed.

The red handkerchief fluttering atop the lonely watchtower under the gloomy sky looked even more ominous.

Among the fields were scattered frozen chunks of snow here and there, and where the snow had melted, the dark green shoots of wild grasses looked as if they were sprouting like fresh leaves. The places where the earth smelled of fresh soil waking from a long deep sleep were the sunny spots. Young shoots wore bright green clothes and raised their heads, while on the mountain sides, dry grasses tangled together in dark blue hues.

I took a slow look around the village outskirts to pass the tedious time waiting for the messenger's return.

Just as noon was beginning to fade, I walked quite a bit toward the west outskirts of Yeonggotap.

For me, it was the end of a painfully long wait, a wait filled with longing. Though I tried to keep calm to ease the restless excitement welling inside me, I could not stop the anxious fire from rising. The heavy gray sky hung low as if about to settle, and my heart waiting against that was crushed by the gloomy atmosphere. The desolate scenery around was even more depressing.

I sat down for a long while on the hill, suddenly stood up and paced restlessly, then sat down again... repeating this over and over, spending the entire morning this way.

Eventually, I could no longer find peace.

The clouds in the sky seemed to part a little, letting through a faint clear light. But as afternoon began to fade, the light disappeared again, swallowed by the gray clouds that darkened the sky. Around 2 p.m. on that gloomy spring day, I took out my watch repeatedly, waiting anxiously as the hour approached.

My friend Seong Ilso's words kept running through my mind — he was sure the messenger would arrive at Jeong Ogyeong.

I was desperate. I was sure what he said was accurate, so I grew even more anxious.

The previous day, Seong Ilso had borrowed a phone at a small station 60 ri away to tell me the messenger would arrive at Yeonggotap by noon today. He was not the type to lie needlessly. So worries about something happening along the way began to creep in.

About a week earlier, I had been notified by Jeong Gwansuk that a messenger would be sent. I had immediately sent my friend Seong Ilso to Mokryeong County to bring him.

Seong Ilso was an optimist by nature. His name literally means “laugh” — he lived as if carrying all the happiness of the world within him. He never mixed sadness, tears, or sorrow into his life.

Yet even that optimistic man’s voice on the phone had sounded drained when he told me the news. But he had no other details, only saying simply that the messenger would arrive soon.

A subtle, indescribable anxiety kept rising in me. I even counted the dates and distances. From Mokryeong County to Yeonggotap was 240 ri, but the messenger had left five days ago.

Walking 240 ri in five days... no matter how I thought about it, it didn’t make sense.

The messenger’s horse had run 50 ri per hour before, so even if delayed, he should have arrived by now.

“Nothing could have happened,” I reassured myself, recalling that Jeong Gwansuk’s letter said the messenger was doing fine.

But the anxiety did not go away.

This was not just a man’s anxiety over a horse but a lonely lover’s worry on a desolate plain.

“Maybe he’s delayed somewhere along the way.” I tried to think of plausible reasons, but I couldn’t figure out why. I couldn’t find a reason for the delay. I simply couldn’t.

My gaze absentmindedly fixed on one spot.

It was a lonely grave on the hillside. The loneliness gathered there was unbearable. My intuition told me something was wrong. I desperately wished to know why the grave was there.

Looking closely, I saw that some graves had fresh soil recently piled on them. Despite the stubborn ache in my chest, I hurried on. On the bare, exposed burial mounds, charred ashes, scraps of paper, and silver foil were scattered about. I thought these buried beneath the earth were deaths—probably souls that had recently left their loneliness behind and now rested here. Life was loneliness, and death was its final end. This painful view inevitably made my thoughts sentimental.

Some graves had been untouched for years, their tombstones broken or sunken flat, hardened smooth with only faint traces remaining, hidden away in the forest. The only proof these were graves were the leaning stones, silent witnesses that a spirit had once rested and decayed here. These weathered tombstones were not rare; there were many scattered here and there.

Like stubborn survivors, only those stones still stood, and to me, they seemed sharp and somber. A place where body and soul had long since rotted away, yet those ownerless stones remained on the hillside slope, guarding the traces of graves. Should I consider that admirable? The worn letters carved on the stones—who had tended to them? Each letter, each stroke, held the heart of the family and descendants, but after years of wind, frost, snow, and rain, they barely remained legible. Life must leave a legacy, and we must work while we live.

"If I am wasting my youth here on foreign soil for my country, then yes—I must do something while I'm still alive." This thought briefly made me forget my love for Mujeon.

A fallen tombstone lying in the grass, carelessly kicked by passing feet, is just a stone—nothing more.

Around the graves grew many white poplars. Among their pale bark stood a nettle tree, beneath which old leaves decayed. That sight was the saddest thing I had ever seen.

Suddenly, the buried deaths seemed to howl, chasing me away. Dizziness struck, and I sharply turned to look back down the road. Perhaps because the weather was gray, few people passed that day, and the winding road ruled the silence.

Along the path, two deep parallel wagon wheel ruts led me. Those ruts seemed to stare at me with eyes full of despair. They reminded me of a horse pulling a heavy load. The deep grooves showed the horse's suffering clearly. The coachman must have been swinging a long whip to drive it.

"What's going on? Hasn't Mujeon arrived yet?"

My whispered words burst out into a desperate shout.

The sky had already darkened, and I couldn't hold back any longer. I lit a cigarette.

I inhaled deeply and blew smoke hard, but instead of rising, the smoke sank, swirling thickly at my feet. The low air pressure felt like black clouds settling, ready to creep down into the earth.

Even the wind that had blown across the open plain earlier seemed blocked, and the smoke I exhaled stubbornly refused to disperse.

I smoked one cigarette after another, trying to release the heaviness in my chest through the smoke, but even that hope was empty.

My eyes, soaked in despair, searched the horizon farther and farther. Though the path was empty and lifeless, I kept looking. In the end, Mujeon never appeared on that road.

“Damn it, where the hell is Mujeon? Mujeon! Do you know your master waits for you like this—anxious and desperate?” I wondered if Mujeon was purposely delaying, feeling sorry for me. I scolded myself and regretted it, but there was no one to listen. I was talking to graves, tombstones, and white poplar trees.

Gradually, the ground darkened, and the cruel day faded away. In the middle of the field, only the wheat ears had been harvested, while the stalks stood like ghostly pillars, mocking me as they grew taller and shorter.

Under the nettle and white poplar trees, old fallen leaves rustled, drifting down one by one as if each whispered something to me. I smoked my last cigarette, but my beloved Mujeon never appeared.

“Mujeon! Mujeon, where are you? Mujeon!”

My shouted voice pushed back the stillness but was soon swallowed again. The dark air seemed to battle me. It surrounded me like a living liquid, piling hostility like a thick wall.

Suddenly, the old days with Mujeon flooded my mind. That dignified and graceful figure, soaked in sweat. Ah, Mujeon, whose red fur gleamed under the candlelight! Mujeon! The warm body heat shared through life and death. Scenes from the battlefield where we fought side by side, breathing together, leaping from moment to moment between life and death.

One day, from dawn, a fierce battle began at the small border area of Sojiyeong (1 kkul) and lasted all day long. In the end, I was hit in the head by a bullet and severely wounded. With my swollen head wrapped layer upon layer like an Indian turban, I used the pitch-black night to hurriedly lead the unit to a new position. We chose a path along a cliff that seemed hundreds of feet high, and about six hundred infantry and two hundred cavalry were moving forward in a daze.

Then, a sudden incident occurred.

At the instant a "thud" sound echoed sharply, the cliff crumbled beneath me. Mujeon, stepping forward, slipped along with a clump of earth, tumbling down the precipice with no place to grab on, sliding like a flash. The entire unit behind also fell into chaos simultaneously.

The cliff was a steep slope of over 60 degrees, almost perpendicular to the ground from a distance. Mujeon, though pushed down helplessly, tried desperately to find footing and keep balance, struggling in a perilous moment. I, already injured and in this dire situation, forgot all pain. My nerves stiffened like a rock, unable to move a muscle. I could only grip the horse’s reins tightly, hoping the bridle would break instead of losing control.

In this desperate moment, Mujeon and I became one. The dark night swallowed everything; I couldn't see a thing. As we rolled and slipped down several times, Mujeon finally gave in, exhausted, loosening the grip of his front legs, seeming to surrender to fate. I thought this must be the last moment before death. The thought struck me, but summoning every ounce of strength, I shifted my center of gravity toward the horse's hindquarters and quickly jerked the reins upward with all my might.

It was the final act between life and death.

The moment I pulled the reins high, Mujeon, as if understanding the signal, suddenly darted with nimble intelligence like the wind. Summoning the last bit of courage as if to leap into the dark abyss, he wildly bucked and jumped. Somehow, we landed safely on flat ground.

That was how Mujeon saved me. A memory and a recollection I could never forget.

How could I ever forget such a Mujeon?

Whenever he showed off his unique Spanish-style trot, his majestic and fierce presence was a source of great pride and charm for me. That image was vivid in my mind day and night. These thoughts stirred up countless memories with Mujeon, which suddenly hit me like being struck with a steel hammer.

In the distance, two small black dots appeared, growing larger as they approached. I was thrilled simply to see movement enter my field of vision.

"Oh, Mujeon!"

Even without seeing clearly, I instinctively believed it was Mujeon. Perhaps it was the hope I desperately wanted to believe. Immediately, I realized it without doubt.

"This is definitely Mujeon."

I wanted to accept him like a victorious warhorse receiving thunderous applause from thousands of spectators. "The horse that dominates all others, the Mujeon who fought countless battles with me... running across the vast Siberian plains."

My whole body trembled uncontrollably. My face burned, but I felt exhilarated. My chest melted like a frozen glacier thawing.

"Oh, Mujeon is really coming back."

Shouting with excitement, I rushed forward. "Yes! Mujeon really came back for sure!"

Mujeon emerged from the white poplar forest.

Mujeon passed through the low grass.

Mujeon passed right by the zelkova tree. Mujeon came through the thicket.

“Oh, Mujeon! Run faster, please!”

My heart raced uncontrollably. My eyes suddenly blurred. Everything swayed and became hazy.

“I have to open my eyes wide and see Mujeon clearly!”

“Oh, why is the weather so gloomy and dull?”

“If only the clouds would part and the sun would shine bright!”

“If only it was a bit earlier, I could have seen him more clearly... if only it were brighter!”

While I thought this, Mujeon got closer and closer.

One, two... ah, he passed the tenth thicket. Finally, together with Seong Il-so, Mujeon returned.

The Mujeon I longed for stood right before me.

But... this was not the Mujeon I once knew.

I wanted to rush forward, hug him, pet him, and hit him in relief, but my feet would not move, and my arms stiffened.

Mujeon’s appearance had changed too much.

His once strong muscles were now thin and wasted. His once bright, round eyes had sunken deep, as if hiding an egg inside. His rounded rump had lost flesh and looked sharp, his bones prominent and gaunt.

How much hardship must he have endured to look like this? How much suffering made him so thin and withered, like dry autumn grass?

What returned was a Mujeon scarier than a corpse—the Mujeon of bones.

His once glossy coat shone in candlelight, now wrinkled like dry jujube fruit, dull with a dark bluish tint, resembling a sickly dog.

His once bright and lively eyes were sunken like a dry well.

His ears, which always pricked up with alertness and energy, hung low on both sides.

“They say he carried loads of dried tree branches…”

“Enough, enough, I’m begging you, just stop.”

I wished I hadn’t heard it.

“That wretched bastard—once the ice melted and he couldn’t work him anymore, he just made him haul water every day.”

And after walking for six whole days, it was no surprise he had no strength left. At first, they tried to ride him, but when they saw how he staggered and stumbled, they couldn’t bear to get on. That’s what Seong Il-so said—how he had walked the entire six-day journey alongside him.

He said Mujeon collapsed four times while crossing Taemagoryeong, his breathing so labored and blood-stained they thought he might actually die.

But Mujeon, in the end, was no ordinary beast. He kept getting back up, over and over again. Somehow, they dragged themselves through thirty *li* of road a day.

Hearing all that, I had nothing more to say.

If even pack animals can be deceived in this goddamn world, what else can we call it but a cursed world?

“That bastard Jeong-ga isn't even worth cursing. It's just that times have gotten so damn hard for everyone…”

Only after saying that did Seong Il-so finally fall silent.

That night when Mujeon arrived—I honestly don’t remember how he got through it. It was a night so utterly mad, it felt like we’d all lost our minds.

We stripped him of every scrap of clothing he had, and fed him as much as he could eat—secretly bought 200 pounds of dried sweet rice and salt and coarse straw, gave it all to him to gorge on.

I spoon-fed him bite after bite, brushing and combing him over and over, stroking him gently. And in doing so, for a moment, I was able to forget everything.

It took eight full days—eight whole days—before Mujeon finally seemed to recover a little strength.

After much thinking, I decided to sell him off to a big merchant. Because that merchant, at least, truly knew how to love a horse.

I won’t bother naming him here.

But the more I looked at Mujeon, the more unbearable my anger became. I had to grit my teeth and bear it alone, and the effort to suppress it was a kind of self-torture I can’t even explain.

To put it plainly—it wasn't just Jeong-ga I hated. I ended up hating myself too.

Another reason was that I simply couldn't afford to feed Mujeon anymore. Day by day, that burden grew heavier.

In the end, I decided it would be better to sever ties completely with Mujeon, whom I loved so much. Watching him slowly regain his strength only solidified my resolve.

I told myself it was a formal ceremony for Jeong-ga, a farewell offering, something to keep in my heart—but deep down, I had already started hardening myself, little by little.

What seemed like an easy decision gradually piled up inside me, like layers of stone forming a fortress in my chest. Until it hardened fully, I had to press down the unbearable anguish in my heart.

Never in my life did I imagine that pouring my love into a single horse would leave such a crushing weight on my soul.

That's how terrifying attachment can be, how relentless love can become. I learned that even from an animal.

Everyone probably has a few memories in life they'll never forget. For me, one of them is the day I sold Mujeon to that merchant.

That afternoon, I drank like a man possessed—poured liquor down my throat as if to drown myself.

Staggering drunk, I stumbled into a Chinese theater. I didn't even know how I got in, or what was playing. I just wandered in, not knowing, not caring.

How could I have?

4

I had been glancing nervously at my maternal uncle for a while now, looking for a chance to escape from the study room. I was his student. He was teaching me classical Chinese.

My uncle was an intellectual who had studied modern knowledge, so I couldn't understand why he, a grown man, would force a mischievous boy like me to sit still and study Chinese characters. On top of that, his passion for education was overwhelming. No matter how much of a troublemaker I was, in his study room I could only shrink like a mouse in front of a cat.

Maybe it was because his sister—my mother—had passed away two years prior. His intense affection for her may have turned into a sense of duty toward me, her son.

My late father had been a high-ranking official during the final years of the Joseon Dynasty, serving as a third-rank administrator in the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce, equivalent to the Chief Secretary of today's Executive Office. Partly due to his job, but also because of his strict nature, I had grown up without the warmth of a family. With my mother gone, I was a lonely boy who never knew the comforts of home.

I was the only male heir in our household for four generations, though not technically an only child—I had two older sisters. But for some reason, in my boyhood, I had a habit of looking down on women. I felt no particular attachment to my sisters, and since I never reached out to them, I didn't expect affection from them either.

There was only one person I truly cherished, no—what I felt went far beyond affection, something that could only be described as love. He was a young man named Taegyu. He was a freed servant from our household, but to me, he was also a friend, a guardian, and even a teacher.

Taegyu was just twenty years old. I felt like I couldn't survive a moment in a world without him. He always addressed me respectfully as "young master," and although I called him simply "Taegyu," that was only a surface-level linguistic habit. The bond between us was one of deep affection and unwavering loyalty.

Taegyu was the son of a family that had served ours for generations. There were a few other servants in our household, but my late father—though not a member of the Donghak movement—was a reformist who supported their efforts to burn slave registers and free the servants. He had voluntarily freed ours even before others followed suit.

However, Taegyu refused his freedom.

"I have nowhere to go. And even if I did, I could never leave the young master behind."

His tone was firm.

So my father pulled some strings with General Oh, a battalion commander in the national defense army at the time, and had Taegyu placed under his direct command.

Taegyu became a soldier.

Wearing his uniform, Taegyu looked like the most handsome man in the world. I can't describe how proud I was of his crisp black uniform with its shiny gold buttons and wide red waistband, hugging his strong frame. Whenever he had free time, he came to visit me at home, and every time he came, I begged him to let me try on his uniform and play soldier.

Dressed in his uniform, Taegyu would share with me all kinds of stories about masculinity, never holding back. I longed for that uniform—it stirred the dreams and passions of a boy entering manhood.

Whenever Taegyu wasn't around, I endured the emptiness as though I were just biding time until the golden day he'd return.

And today was that day—Taegyu was supposed to come. Maybe by now he was already home, waiting for me in that dazzling uniform.

But my anxious excitement didn't matter. My uncle kept making me read. My mind was elsewhere, so I couldn't focus or read properly.

Then came the sting of the ash switch striking my skin. It hurt.

I clenched my teeth to hold back my rising fury.

Time kept slipping away.

But my uncle showed no sign of ending the lesson.

What if Taegyu grew tired of waiting and left?

Suddenly, without even realizing it myself, I shouted,

"Uncle!"

My voice burst out uncontrollably. My uncle's eyes widened like saucers as he looked at me. I was just as startled by the sound of my own voice. He gazed deeply into my eyes—not briefly, but for quite a while. Then, all of a sudden, he turned his head and said,

"You poor thing."

I was caught off guard. I had been bracing myself for a thunderous scolding, but instead, my uncle's face showed pity. It was so unexpected, it felt strangely surreal.

I had a vague, uneasy feeling—a sense of something ominous. My uncle returned to his stern teacher self and wouldn't let me leave, forcing me to continue studying.

Only after I gave up all hope of meeting Taegyu did he finally set me free.

I ran home like a madman.

Maybe Taegyu was still waiting for me.

"Oh please, Buddha…"

I prayed as I ran.

“Dear Buddha, Kwanseum Bosal, spirits of heaven and earth, please let Taegyu still be at my house.”

When I got to the front of the house, the gate was wide open. I could hear chatter and laughter—quiet, but unmistakably festive. It felt like some kind of celebration.

I rushed inside.

Taegyu was nowhere in sight. But in his place stood a young woman I had never seen before. Her shiny black hair was neatly tied up, and she wore a flowing white hanbok that made her look like she could float away. She smiled softly at me.

Someone said something to me, but I heard it as if in a dream:

“She’s your new mother.”

In our country, stepmothers have always had a bad reputation. In every old tale, stepmothers were portrayed as wicked, scheming, and cruel—monsters in disguise. If you were to analyze why that is, it might reveal something deep about our national psyche. But I’m not here to do that. All I can say is, like most boys, I had the same instinctive fear of stepmothers.

Though the atmosphere in our home became brighter after she arrived, I spent even more time lost in mischief.

My new mother was always sweet and gentle with me, but instinctively, I kept my guard up. Of course, that was something only I knew—something buried in my subconscious. Having never felt a real mother’s love, every time she gently touched me, my heart brightened, and a warm fullness spread through my chest.

At that point, I still didn’t truly know her. So even though I found myself drawn to her, I fought that feeling.

But as time went on, I realized she wasn’t just any ordinary woman.

She had never been formally schooled, yet her knowledge was remarkable. At night, under the flickering lamplight, while she sat sewing, I would review the Chinese characters I’d learned from my uncle. When I made mistakes, she would correct them.

And that wasn’t all.

She had a rare passion for self-improvement. She learned sericulture and weaving. She even kept beehives in the yard, harvesting the honey herself and feeding it to me.

“This is medicine,” she would say.

“Honey’s not medicine! And I’m healthy—why do I need medicine?” I’d sometimes protest, just to be difficult.

Of course, she never gave me a scientific explanation of honey’s benefits, or used fancy modern terms. She probably didn’t even know them. But she believed in the healing power of honey, passed down as a traditional remedy, and she was determined to get me to eat it.

Maybe it was thanks to that honey, but I was always bouncing off the walls, and I’m sure I gave her no end of trouble.

By then, I had turned nine.

That was when my father was assigned to a new post as the county magistrate in Icheon, Gangwon-do.

So our whole family moved to Icheon. It was the northernmost edge of Gangwon Province, bordering both Hamgyeong and Pyeongan provinces—a remote mountain village surrounded by rugged peaks. Even though it was so deep in the mountains, the Japanese had still managed to invade the area. They didn’t leave a single place untouched.

After transferring to a new elementary school, my trademark mischief only got worse.

Like I said, Icheon was nestled deep in the mountains. My world stretched out from the backyard woods into the endless wilderness.

Looking back now, I think my later obsession with hunting started back then—when I used to run through the hills like a wild animal, chasing rabbits and pheasants.

At the time, my only weapon was a slingshot. And I was a sharpshooter with it. I used that slingshot to hunt birds and rabbits.

One day, I was walking down the street. I don’t remember exactly, but I was probably wandering around looking for something to play with.

Then, as I turned a corner, I saw someone riding a donkey coming toward me. Upon closer look, I realized it was the Japanese manager of the financial union.

A smile crept across my face. It’s not like I had any personal grudge or resentment against him. It’s just that my aimless slingshot had found a target to aim at. Of course, the “gun” was just a slingshot, and the “bullet” was a nameless pebble.

The donkey, unaware of my intentions, was trotting along peacefully with its rider, the bells around its neck jingling gently.

I hid behind a large zelkova tree by the roadside and aimed carefully. My target was the donkey's groin. Holding my breath, I focused on the target and released the rubber band with a snap.

The pebble shot out in a perfect straight line, slicing through the air. And at that very moment, I saw the donkey go wild as if it had been mortally wounded.

Bullseye!

The thrill I felt was beyond words. But it all happened in the blink of an eye.

Moments later, I had no choice but to witness the man fall off the donkey with a loud "Oof!" and crash to the ground. Foaming at the mouth and kicking wildly, the donkey trampled him. The donkey's owner had his skull cracked in two, and blood was pouring out everywhere.

Fortunately, the man's life wasn't in danger. But my family had to pay for his medical bills, which was no small amount. There's no need to explain how serious that was for our household.

Back then, I was fascinated by the lives of commoners. Around mealtime, I would often visit the homes of rickshaw pullers or laborers to beg for food.

To my stepmother, this must've been deeply troubling. She probably thought I was rejecting the meals she cooked, choosing instead to beg like some desperate drifter. I can imagine she might have felt that way.

Another time, I caught a softshell turtle at the Imjin River. I was mesmerized by how it would stick its neck out and pull it back in, so I held onto it for a long time. But then, for some reason, I suddenly got bitten on the sole of my foot.

I had been playing around, lifting the turtle with both hands and teasing it upside down, trying to get it to stick its head back out. But the moment I let my guard down, it bit me in revenge.

They say a softshell turtle's bite is strong enough to cut through a young bamboo stalk. Luckily, since it had been caught on a fishing line all night, its bite wasn't strong enough to cut off the tip of my tongue, but it still hurt like hell. Even then, my mother carefully treated the wound on my foot, which had almost been permanently damaged. Her eyes looked genuinely sorrowful as she tended to me. And, as always, she said not a single word of blame.

Up to that point, my attitude toward my stepmother had been twofold: first, I had no reason to rebel against her, so I didn't; second, she didn't seem to dislike me, so I didn't dislike her either. It was a very pragmatic and passive understanding—nothing more.

But eventually, something happened that completely bonded me and my mother together.

At the time, in rural areas like Icheon, cattle savings clubs were popular. No, calling it a trend would be misleading—it was a serious matter of survival. For poor farming households, buying a

cow was no easy feat. So they organized these savings groups to collectively purchase livestock, with help from the local authorities.

A cow cost 58 won back then. That one animal could determine the financial future of an entire household. Naturally, farmers took it very seriously.

Around this time, I came up with a strange new game. I had grown bored of simple, childish games and was no longer entertained by ordinary play.

One day, I was coming back from the Imjin River with a live eel I had caught.

As I crossed a field, I happened upon a cow from one of those savings clubs, peacefully grazing.

For a moment, I stood there staring blankly at the cow. Outwardly I might've looked vacant, but inside I was already quickly cooking up a plan.

I approached the cow with a sly grin. Of course, a few of my friends were with me.

We went up to the cow and even gave its strong back a few friendly slaps.

Then we carried out our plan.

With great care, I inserted the squirming, slippery eel into the cow's anus.

The eel slid right in.

We exchanged glances and waited eagerly for what would happen next.

Before long, the calm cow suddenly started thrashing and snorting like mad. It bucked wildly, went berserk, and then—just like that—it died.

I could never have imagined that the sight of a cow going mad would be so utterly horrifying, and I never even suspected that an eel could kill a cow. The whole event was such a massive shock to me.

I had never felt such intense guilt before.

Feeling crushed, I returned home. My mother, as usual, was spinning thread on the wooden porch. Without stopping her hands, she said something to me, but I couldn't hear a word.

I went into the main room and sat down like a sack of bricks. The guilt of having killed someone else's cow would hit me later. What really tore through my chest was the sheer impact of having witnessed the final moments of a living being.

Suddenly, the front gate clattered loudly, and my father burst in, his face red with fury.

“Where is that brat?!”

At my father’s fierce, threatening tone, my mother stopped spinning and stood up.

I, too, jumped to my feet from the main room.

“You damn brat! You killed someone else’s precious cow! I’ll beat you to death!”

Unable to contain his rage, my father grabbed the iron spinning rod from the loom next to my mother. It was a heavy iron rod, and he hurled it straight at me.

But before the heavy iron could reach me, I felt myself being shielded by my mother’s body. She had rushed in front of me and taken the blow.

At that moment, I saw the shockingly red blood streaming out from beneath her white cotton skirt.

My mother’s ankle had been completely shattered by the spinning rod.

“Mother!” I screamed without even realizing it, and through tear-blurred eyes, I saw her mangled ankle clearly.

“Oh my dear, are you hurt anywhere?” she asked me, hiding her own injury.

After that day, my mother stopped eating. She didn’t make a show of fasting, but when I paid close attention, I realized she was only drinking water and not eating anything else. On top of that, she wasn’t even sleeping at night.

For some reason, she stopped staying in my father’s room and instead shared a room with me.

On the third night, I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night. My mother was still up, sewing quietly. But when I looked closely, I saw she was crying.

I couldn’t bear it any longer, so I threw off my blanket and sat up.

“Mother, why are you crying?” I asked.

Startled, she quickly wiped away her tears and said, “Crying? Why would I cry? Go back to sleep.”

“No, you were crying. I know. You haven’t been eating lately either. It’s because I killed the cow, right? I won’t ever do anything like that again, so please don’t cry.”

I said that, choking up with tears myself. My mother smiled faintly and gently stroked my head.

“No matter what you do wrong, have I ever raised my voice at you? If I shout, won’t the neighbors gossip about how the stepmother treats the child? And your father brought me here to help raise you well. If all I do is shout, of course he’d be upset. The truth is, I’m not your real mother. But I’ve lived all this time leaning on you with all my heart. And yet, the way you act... all I see is defiance and resentment. With you acting like that, how could I eat?”

She hugged me tightly and continued, stroking my head with her soft voice.

At that moment, I felt a deep, bone-aching emotion. I realized then that my mother was truly a kind and gentle person. I buried my face in her skirt and cried for a long time.

It was the first time I cried like that, and the first time I had ever shed so many tears.

After that day, I became a completely different child.

My grades improved rapidly, and soon I was being called a model student. When I graduated from elementary school, I was chosen as one of the three top students in the entire province of Gangwon. I received the Governor-General’s Award from then-Governor-General Terauchi, and I was admitted to the prestigious First High School, the predecessor to what is now Gyeonggi High School.

It was the first time I had ever seen my mother’s face look so proud and happy.

To commemorate my admission into middle school, she bought me a 7-won nickel pocket watch.

Once I became a middle school student, I often stayed up all night thinking about how my country had been taken away from us.

That thought was always tied to the death of Jung Tae-gyu. What I saw with my own eyes during my boyhood—the death of Jung Tae-gyu—was burned into my brain like a scar.

My country was lost when I was eleven years old. Jung Tae-gyu’s death happened in the fall when I was twelve, not long after my stepmother came to live with us.

At the time, Korea had not yet been officially annexed, but in reality, we were already a vassal state of Japan. As part of their preparations for the Eulsa Treaty, the Japanese decided to disarm our national military. They forcibly disarmed around 15,000 troops. Emperor Sunjong allowed only 3,000 soldiers to remain, and then the army was formally dissolved. On that humiliating day, Battalion Commander Park Seong-hwan, from the City Guard, committed suicide, unable to bear the disgrace of being unable to protect his country.

Outraged by his death, soldiers smashed the armory, distributed the ammunition among themselves, and killed a Japanese captain.

The troops stationed at Seosomun refused to surrender their weapons and engaged the Japanese army in street battles. Inspired by this, discharged soldiers across the country began forming

militias. But our forces were outdated, using rusty old weapons, and had no real commanders. Though their loyalty was strong, they lacked the means. Worse, traitors began to emerge from within.

When captured, militia members had their hands tied with wire and were dragged away to be executed.

Jung Tae-gyu, who had been a subordinate of Oh Cham-ryeong, had been assigned to Park Seong-hwan's battalion and was seriously wounded in the battle on August 1, 1907—the day of the humiliating disarmament. He made it as far as the front of our house before dying.

I wailed over his corpse for so long. If people hadn't physically pulled me away, I don't think I would have left him.

Jung Tae-gyu had died from a Japanese bullet. The Japanese had taken him from me.

They took him away and even took my country from me.

As I gradually became aware of the world in middle school, I often found myself deeply lost in thoughts of Jung Tae-gyu, who had once given my boyhood a profound sense of purpose.

I became a youth who stayed up all night contemplating what path I should take.

During the summer break of my third year at Gyeonggi High School, I went swimming near Mapo on the Han River. There, I had a chance encounter with someone who would become a turning point in my life—Mr. Lyuh Woon-hyung.

To describe that moment in detail would take forever. For now, I must hurry on with my mother's story.

After a short summer break, Mr. Lyuh crossed the Amnok River again, heading back to the continent. I stayed up for days and nights with sleepless eyes.

And finally, I made my decision.

I decided to abandon my studies and join the independence movement. That is how I eventually set out.

My destination was faraway Shanghai.

In that vast land, I left my homeland behind with only the name of Lyuh Woon-hyung as my guiding light.

Farewell, my homeland—until the day of liberation.

In truth, when I left Korea, I was filled with an overwhelming mix of adventurous excitement, anxiety, and fear about the unknown future ahead of me. I had no room in my mind to think about my mother.

But the moment I stepped onto the dark red earth of the continent, what swept over me was an unbearable longing for my mother.

However, everything was unfamiliar, and my new life was overwhelming. Naturally, I had no time to dwell on thoughts of my mother.

But the mother who had sent me away never spent a single day without tears.

I only came to know this much later, but for my mother—who saw me as the only pillar of her life—to hear only vague rumors that her son had joined the independence army, without knowing whether I was alive or dead, must have filled her heart with nothing but suffocating sorrow and despair.

What's more, my mother had no children of her own. Naturally, her relationship with my father grew increasingly strained, and all she could do was live out her days guarding the dignity of a woman alone.

She lived with a heavy sense of guilt toward my father. Since I, the fourth-generation only son, had joined the independence army, I had effectively become a child she had to erase from memory.

The obsessive thought that she had severed the line of a prestigious Yi family tortured my mother day and night.

Tormented by such thoughts, she eventually hardened her heart and suggested to my father that he remarry a gentle young lady.

But my mother was still a woman. How could she feel at peace, giving away the man she loved more than her own life to someone else?

Even now, when I think of my mother's state of mind back then, I can't help but burst into tears.

Remarrying to preserve the family line is, in some ways, a convenient excuse used by Korean men.

After some hesitation, my father finally gave in and started a new household with the woman my mother had recommended.

Unable to bear the loneliness and emptiness of life, my mother eventually turned to Buddhism and became a devout follower.

By around 1920, the number of Korean independence fighters in Manchuria's northeast had surged.

Our weapons were mostly purchased at low prices from free markets in Russian territories such as Vladivostok, and as finances allowed, we acquired enough to organize an entire military division.

I was part of the Bukro Military Government Office, where I fought alongside General Kim Jwa-jin through many fierce battles, establishing my reputation as a young military officer.

After the famous Battle of Cheongsanri, I crossed into Russia and helped organize the Korean Revolutionary Army with my comrades.

Right after we had formed the Korean Revolutionary Army, the Heukha Incident broke out.

The Heukha Incident was, in a word, our resistance against the betrayal of the Soviet Union.

Our independence army had joined the Russian Revolution and helped defeat the White Army (the counter-revolutionaries) after receiving the following promises from the Soviets:

1. That the Soviet government would prioritize the liberation of Korea, then under Japanese colonial rule, as a key policy for global peace.
2. That the Soviets would support and protect the training of Korean independence fighters.
3. That within Soviet territory, the Korean independence forces would be allowed autonomy and freedom of movement.
4. That a military academy would be built to train independence fighters.
5. That during the training period, the Chita government would supply weapons free of charge.

But what happened?

Once the Russian Revolution was completed, they betrayed us. They suddenly issued a unilateral disarmament order to the Korean independence army stationed in the free city of Heihe along the Amur River.

By that time, we were already surrounded by Soviet forces.

We fought to the end, determined to dye the Amur River red with our blood, resisting with everything we had until the last man.

This is not all.
After the Heuksu incident and the retreat, throughout all of wartime Siberia, the Soviets betrayed us. They disarmed us and carried out massacres.
I was shot in the forehead while fighting the Red Devils who had betrayed us.
By the grace of heaven and ancestors, I survived.

I was surrounded by comrades receiving medical treatment.
Even in my hazy and faint consciousness, I distinctly saw a portrait of my mother.

Ah, my dear mother!
My chest suddenly grew tight.

“Mother!”

I called out as tears burst from my eyes.
And at that moment, I witnessed a miracle.

There, truly, stood my mother in her compassionate form.
I thought I must have been dreaming. But then—

“Beom-seok, it’s me. It’s your mother. I’ve come.”

I clearly heard my mother's voice.
The two of us immediately embraced and broke down in sobs.

“Mother… what is going on? Is this a dream? How could you have come all the way here?”

I looked at her wrinkled face, darkened and scorched from the sun, and I couldn’t believe it was real. It was like she had emerged from a painting.
But after listening to her story in detail, I finally began to feel that I truly was in my mother’s arms.

She had wandered across Manchuria to find me.
To cross the Yalu River safely, she dressed in Japanese women’s clothing. But along the way, she was captured by bandits.

At that time, the bandits in Manchuria were of many types—some aligned with Japanese forces, some with the independence army, and so on.
She was taken to their stronghold and was nearly executed. They claimed she was dressed as a Japanese woman, so she must be a spy and deserved to be shot.

As a final request, she wrote in refined Chinese characters, “My son is such-and-such, a commander of the Korean Independence Army. Please allow me to see him once before I die,” and pleaded with the leader of the bandits.

To her surprise, the leader was shocked and said,
“I had no idea who you were… I’ve brought this terrible misfortune upon you. I am actually the sworn brother of Commander Beom-seok.”

Immediately, he summoned a carriage, assigned guards, and rushed my mother to where I was staying.

The reunion between mother and son after years apart was overwhelming beyond words.

I received treatment for my wounds directly from my mother.
Who else could be as lucky as I was? That was all I could think at the time.

She had sold every last piece of rice field and land she owned in Gangneung, Gangwon-do, and brought with her 1,700 won.
Handing me the money, she said, “Now I can die without regret.”

With that money, I bought guns and explosives and threw myself even more into the independence movement.

Having finally met her son, my mother was soon summoned to Jongno police station.
You can imagine what the Japanese must have done to the mother of an independence army commander.

Yet my mother, ever composed, pretended to be a madwoman and never gave them even the slightest hint.
She smashed glass windows in the station and laughed hysterically to fool the police officers.

Eventually, she was released under the label of “mentally ill.”
For the next two years, she went on a pilgrimage to the temples of Gangwon Province.

It was all to pray for me.

Two years later, she returned to our home in Cheonyeon-dong, Seoul.
She vowed to complete ten years of prayers—eight years of *baekil gido*, 100-day prayer sessions held annually.
Then she passed away.

To complete the *baekil gido*, she would fetch Yeongcheon spring water every night at midnight, regardless of snow or rain, and offer prayers for me.

On the eighth year of the 100-day prayers, the final day arrived.
She prepared food and invited all our relatives to a generous feast.

When the guests had all gone home, she called my older sister and said,
“Stay here tonight.”

So my sister, for the first time in a long while, spent the night at our mother’s side.

With her usual gentle tone, my mother said,
“The bird flies away today.”

My sister assumed she meant she was heading back to Manchuria again.
But then my mother continued,

“My heart is full of longing for Beom-seok. I regret not completing the full ten years of prayer. But even if I die, don’t bury me in the ground. Cremate me, grind my bones into ash, and scatter them into the Han River. As dust, I must fly to see Beom-seok once more.”

Then she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.
That was my foster mother's final moment.

Later, my sister wondered if it had been suicide—but it was in fact a peaceful, natural death.

After liberation, I finally returned to the homeland I had yearned for.
But my mother was no longer there.

There was not even a grave.

Even if something in this world were said to be the most precious, could anything compare to a mother’s love?

Whenever I think of her, the memories return vividly—
Her gentle, sorrowful, kind eyes as she washed the blood from my face.

Her jet-black hair, her always clean and modest cotton clothes.

Though she was my foster mother, she was the most noble, wise, and loving mother I could ever be proud of.

2. The Woman Who Made a Miracle

Even now, whenever I close my eyes, I can vividly see her figure, as if she’s right before me. Having witnessed her as the embodiment of a perfect woman, both inside and out, she remains in my eyes, then and now, as the very incarnation of truth, goodness, and beauty.
She was the nameless wife of a kind and honest farmer who lived in a bleak, remote border region of Manchuria—a place where proper schooling was a luxury no one could afford.
And yet, I can still clearly see her: tall, slim, fair-skinned, and pure, dashing out of her house, flinging the door open with great strength, bounding swiftly across the snow-covered mountain path.
She was running to tell me of a miracle that had occurred overnight—a miracle she had brought about.
The woman who made a miracle.

Did it come from the warmth of the love that always lived within her heart?
Or was it the result of my desperate prayers for her throughout the night?
I still don’t know what caused it.

I came to know her thanks to my beloved horse, who had been with me through thick and thin in the vast wilderness of Manchuria and the frozen wastes of Siberia—sharing with me the suffering of hardship and the glory of victory.
Even now, whenever I think of my horse, something hot rises in my throat and leaves me speechless.
During those difficult days as an independence fighter, I paid 1,800 rubles—an enormous sum at the time—to buy my precious steed.
It was a magnificent horse, one that boasted the strength and speed of three ordinary horses, clever and proud.
It was born to carry a brave commander through the battlefield, sweeping across the front lines like the wind, returning with honor, a living emblem of triumph.

That noble steed, once walking proudly at the head of victorious troops, its hooves light and its mane flowing with dignity,
was now, in order to survive, pulling 2,400 pounds of white poplar wood daily, dashing 80 li (about 30 kilometers) across icy mountain valleys.

The path from warhorse to draft animal was not just a cruel twist of fate.
It was the bitter tragedy of a nationless man who had once fought with a sword in hand to reclaim his country,
only to be injured mid-charge, disarmed by a third country that claimed neutrality,
and left utterly alone in a vast foreign land after losing his comrades.

That pain, the memory of my wounded soul, still pierces me into a thousand pieces.
Perhaps it's like entrusting the person you love most to someone else,
and later, finding them changed beyond recognition—no longer the person you once knew.
Yes, maybe even worse than that.

But it was precisely while searching for my beloved horse in that pitiful state that I met that unforgettable woman.

In 1918, after the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917, our scattered Korean independence forces throughout Manchuria regrouped with a single purpose and crossed the border into Siberia.
We believed that helping the Russian Revolution would pave the way to our own country's liberation.
So, aligning ourselves with the Red Army, we fought in the Russian Far East against Japanese invaders and the White Army, achieving victory after grueling battle.

We responded to the anti-imperialist ideals raised high by the Russian revolutionaries.
We fought for a future military treaty that they promised would follow the completion of their revolution.

The core of that agreement, when boiled down, was this:
The Soviets would support and protect the training of Korean independence fighters and hand over the triangular border zone between Manchuria and the Soviet Union to us as a military base.

But in the end, our independence forces were betrayed—entrapped by a cunning traitor.

As history has loudly testified ever since,
the so-called revolutionaries of the Red side knew how to use others when it suited them,
but when the time came, they threw away not just all political and ethical obligations, but even the formal international treaties they had signed with us.

They were truly shameless, heartless, and dishonorable.

Even before the blood of our young fighters had dried—those who had sacrificed their lives to support their revolution in the brutal Siberian plains—
the Reds did not uphold the promised agreement.
Instead, they forcibly demanded our complete disarmament.

Even if we were a stateless, wandering force, how could they do this to us?
We had stripped off our armor and fought until exhaustion and despair consumed us,
and yet, in the end, they betrayed us.

Ever since 1917, they had shouted to the world:
"We will liberate all oppressed peoples!
We will challenge every imperialist and militarist nation that enslaves others and turns foreign lands into colonies!"

To us, who had lost our country and fallen deep into despair,
their propaganda had sounded like a hopeful morning bell ringing from heaven itself.

So we risked our lives to help their revolution,
pouring the blood of our youth into the vast Siberian plains.
We relentlessly harassed the Japanese army, which they themselves could not defeat,
until we finally forced Japan to withdraw from their territory and expelled the White Army.

However, the close ally we trusted like iron and stone revealed himself to be a sly and cruel traitor to the Soviet Reds. Because of their betrayal, they forced us to painfully realize the true nature of communism deep in our bones, exposing the true character of the Russian Revolution. This made us face the grim reality that we would stand forever as enemies against them, burdened with an irrevocable fate of separation.

The enemy Red Army that sparked the revolution relentlessly pushed the fleeing White Army eastward into Siberia, driving them back like a flood.

Our independent army, having made an agreement with the Red Army's spies, moved upstream toward Lake Baikal to cut off the retreating White Army's rear and launch an attack.

At that time, General Kim Jwa-jin and I believed that we were aiding the Reds only as a means of advancing our independence movement, not fighting for the Russian Revolution itself.

But moving the independent army deep into Siberia, toward Lake Baikal, meant getting too far from our true stage—the land of Manchuria.

If we went that far, we risked becoming mere tools of Russia, getting entangled in conflicts that contradicted our independence and cause.

“We are, after all, not people who fight for Russia’s interests,” we thought, so we could not enter that far into Siberia even while anticipating such dangers.

Despite that, some seeking favor with Russia pressured the independent army to swiftly advance toward Lake Baikal.

I was firmly opposed to this view.

In the end, I crossed back into Manchuria with five comrades, wading through the cold, deep Ussuri River.

Two comrades were shot and killed in the river, and General Kim Jwa-jin crossed the Ussuri River one step after us.

The independent army left in Manchuria negotiated again with the spies dispatched by the Reds, and formed an alliance with the White Army driven toward the southeast near Ussuri River and Nikolsk.

Together with the allied forces of Britain, France, China, and Japan, they moved into eastern Siberia and attacked the Japanese army stationed there, who were still determined to seize Manchuria and held several divisions.

As a result, the Japanese army began retreating, leaving only the Vladivostok area in southern Primorye.

The White Army also suffered defeat through coordinated operations with us and the Soviet Red Army, and most of them were driven across the Russian border toward Manchuria and Mongolia in several groups.

Thus, the Soviet Red revolutionary forces almost completely occupied Siberia.

At this time, Russia’s attitude became utterly shameless.

Instead of honoring the promises made with us, or even showing gratitude for the blood we shed, they acted with unthinkable political cruelty.

Where in the world does such shamelessness exist?

The victorious Soviet Eastern Second Army forced our independent army to fully disarm as they advanced into Nikolsk.

At that time, our independent army in Manchuria had its general headquarters in Siberia under General Kim Gyu-sik (not Dr. Kim Gyu-sik of the Korean provisional government).

Under his command, our troops fought in their respective units with determination.

I was a division commander in the Suwihoon area.

When we, exhausted from battle, received their demand to disarm, anger boiled inside us.

The Soviet Russian Eastern Second Army, advancing to Nikolsk, insisted on disarmament, while secretly beginning strategic encirclement maneuvers against our forces.

Despite holding the area south of Ussuri, we were surrounded without any chance to resist.

Moreover, General Kim Gyu-sik, our independent army's commander who entered Nikolsk upon invitation by the Eastern Second Army, was finally taken hostage.

Once our commander was captured, there was no longer any reason for us to remain.

At that time, a spy who had infiltrated our lines to observe our battle situation was captured but then escaped, which prompted us to open fire simultaneously on the Russian army.

My unit resisted for nearly two weeks south of the Ussuri River before finally retreating southward via the small unit base at Dongnyeong County, Jilin Province, Manchuria.

However, the Russian army that had cut off our rear occupied the high ground west of our escape route and launched surprise attacks on our unit trying to cross the frozen Yubun River.

No matter how brave the unit, there was no way to withstand the bullets raining down from the high ground; the enemy controlled the battlefield like a sword hanging over our heads.

Furthermore, our troops, worn down by long continuous fighting, lacked even supplies, and the combination of cold, hunger, and exhaustion crushed our spirits.

Yet we fought desperately, fueled by sheer will to survive.

Comrades fell bleeding everywhere.

Despite the barrage of bullets, we had no choice but to cross the river, leaving our dying comrades behind.

At that point, nothing existed before my eyes except the fight.

From the frontline, I commanded my troops fiercely like a shark.

Suddenly, my mind went dizzy and I collapsed near the riverbank.

The enemy occupied the hill directly opposite us, and the bullets they fired flew just over our heads.

One bullet shattered the skull on the right side of my face, passing through my cheekbone.

Blood gushed out like a broken spring, and I felt like I was already dead.

Rather than suffering and dying slowly, I preferred to die quickly.

As my final act, I handed my twenty-round revolver—strapped to my waist and symbolizing my command authority—to my subordinate with a weak hand.

Then, I drew my Belgian revolver, my personal protection weapon, ready to fire.

At that moment, my comrades shouted and grabbed me.

“Commander, no! Don’t!” their cries filled the air.

But I couldn’t hear them.

“Let me go! I’m done!” I pleaded weakly, having no strength left to resist.

Blood poured out uncontrollably, ignoring the emergency care of medics.

Frozen, I appeared as if carrying a massive blood stain on my body, as I was told later.

“Commander, you who said we would face death and life together—how can you say this now? What are we, the ones left behind, supposed to do?”
The comrades begged with tears in their eyes.
Using all my remaining strength, I asked,
“Who will lift the bullet from my head and show it to me?”
If the hole was clean and clear, I had no will to live, but if it was only a grazing wound, then maybe, just maybe, I could survive by sheer chance.
Someone carefully examined my wound and said,
“It’s a diagonal cut.”
That was good. Then I decided to try again.
Wrapping the bandage tightly like a turban, I gathered my last strength and stood up. The blood seeping into my eyes and the freezing cold sticking to my back felt like my blood was rejuvenated by pain.
We wanted to self-destruct. I rewrapped the bandage around my head that had the attached bayonet. Then I moved my numb body on the ice.
During that time, I devised a plan in my head. The enemy-occupied hill had two roads.
I ordered about thirty cavalrymen to suddenly charge down the main road, while the rest took the other route to flank and attack.
As blood began to circulate again in my numb body, I got on a horse with the help of comrades.

The unremovable blood-stained bandage hung behind me like a folding screen. Instinctively, I drew my bayonet and charged toward the enemy lines.

By some god's grace, we won the battle.
When the fighting ended, I was in despair and somehow found myself carried by comrades to Yeonggotap hospital.
Yeonggotap was located 400 ri away from our battlefield.
When I regained consciousness, I was lying on a bed in a familiar house.

Earlier, after I was wounded, command of our unit had passed to a man named Nam, who had been a company commander in the late Joseon period. He rested our exhausted unit and aimed to reorganize it. Because many of our people lived in Palmentong, a place with a strong nationalist spirit and many independence activists, he decided to move the unit there for support.
Once my head wound healed enough, my mind rushed toward Palmentong.
I eventually found the unit in Palmentong.
But waiting for me there were only four or five soldiers and one skeletal, exhausted horse.
Moreover, the soldiers all wore tattered uniforms but carried no weapons.
I was glad to see a horse, but seeing the condition of my comrades, I was overwhelmed by a terrible premonition.
"Where are the weapons?" I asked bluntly.
They bowed their heads like guilty people and said,
"We're sorry."
"What happened? Did you come back from Palmentong properly?"
"If we had just come back from Palmentong, why would we be in this state? That message is from the Chinese military."

"Wait, if that's General Zhang Zongchang from the Chinese army, what the hell is he sending me messages for?"
"Yes, in the end, we were disarmed by them."

Fire blazed in my eyes. I asked how they got their equipment, and about the precious things I cherished.
After hearing the full story, it went like this: Our unit, heading toward Palmentong where many of our compatriots lived, mistakenly took the wrong route and unexpectedly ended up near the Jungdong railway line. The Jungdong railway was a joint Russian-Chinese railway built after 1900 with Russian imperial ambitions in Manchuria.
For an armed army of a different ethnic group to enter railway territory under a single Chinese protectorate without any diplomatic clearance, while perhaps not hostile, was still considered an invasion of foreign territory.
Expecting the lower-ranking Chinese commanders guarding the railway to turn a blind eye to our independence army's armed activities was a foolish and naive hope.

From our perspective, it was clear that the battlefield for our military activities until independence could only be in Manchuria.
Out of hope for the future and responsibility for other independence units, unlike the Russian army, we could not open fire on the Chinese army.

As a result, our 800-strong unit was disarmed, and an additional 500 sets of equipment and supplies we carried were confiscated by them.
They issued return travel expenses and demanded the complete disbandment of our unit and the prohibition of any organizational activity within a short time.

Originally, horses were considered part of military equipment, so all of them had been confiscated. However, the Chinese commander-in-chief at the time, General Zhang Zhongchang, returned my horse to me out of respect.

“Why didn’t you report this to Yeonggo Tower?”
I unjustly scolded my innocent comrade.
“I know the temperament of the commander,” he replied. “How could I have reported it? If he caused any trouble again, those of us left behind would be like dogs without a leash.”
He let out a long sigh.

Everything that happened in Palmyun-dong felt so futile, like tracing the fading footsteps of a dream.

Without a word, he walked toward my beloved horse. The horse, unable to speak, pressed its head against its owner’s chest, greeting him after a long time.
Only a few suspicious glances passed between him and me.
“I’m just glad you’re back,” he said.

I stroked my horse’s mane and looked up at the sky.
The clouds floated carelessly.

In Palmyun-dong, nearly three hundred of our settler farmers lived.
There, I was waiting for an opportunity to gather the scattered soldiers again and organize a unit.
My plan was to train an independent guerrilla force to break through the depths of Baekdusan Mountain, travel along the Baekdu mountain range, and directly descend to Inwangsan.
For the time being, I decided to stay at a relative’s house and wait for the right moment.

I had no worries about food or shelter, but the biggest problem was caring for my beloved horse.
The daily feed cost for the horse was equivalent to five won, which back then was about the amount one person would need for a month.
At that time, I simply could not afford the cost of maintaining my horse.

To find a solution, I sought out Jeong Myeong-seok from Palmyun-dong, a strong-willed patriot who had fought as a militia soldier.
But he, too, had no effective plan.
Still, I left the issue of horse care in his hands and returned to my lodging.

A few days later, Myeong-seok came to see me.
“I’ve thought of a possible way...”

I perked up.
“What is it? Tell me.”
“It’s not an ideal method by any means. You can’t just let such a precious horse starve, right?”
“Of course not. We have to save it first.”

Myeong-seok then explained a grim plan.
He had a younger brother, Gwan-seok, who was unlike him—uneducated and living simply by digging the land for a living.
Gwan-seok worked in the winter in the Samchang Valley of Mokryeong County, hauling beautiful white pine logs to Mokryeong Station to earn money.
Myeong-seok suggested that if my horse could be used as a draft animal to pull timber across the frozen river, the problem of feeding it could be solved.

No matter how you look at it, that was grueling labor for a horse.
Still, as Myeong-seok said, we had to save it first.

After many sleepless nights of contemplation, I finally entrusted my horse to Gwan-seok.

Mokryeong Station was a major stop on the eastern branch of the Jungdong Railway. There was a sawmill run by White Russians there.
The timber they needed came from the logging site 80 li away in the Samchang Valley.
My horse could pull 2,400 geun (about 8,880 pounds) of timber at once, earning 25 won per trip.
Two round trips of 40 li each would earn 50 won a day.

Gwan-seok, who was notoriously greedy, surely wouldn’t do less than two trips per day.
So my horse had to run an average of 160 li daily, hauling 2,400 geun across slippery ice for 80 li.
If it didn’t do this, it would starve to death.

With tears in my eyes, I handed my beloved horse over to Gwan-seok, who had come to borrow it.
Is this how it feels to entrust someone you love to another’s care?

That’s how my horse left for Mokryeong Station.

To survive, my horse faced countless hardships.
It was a riding horse, not a draft horse.
It was like asking a basketball or marathon athlete to carry a heavy load.
If horses had pride, mine certainly would never have agreed to pull such a burden.
And indeed, my horse was proud.

Yet, before the harsh reality of survival, even my proud horse had no choice.

It ate rough feed while waiting for the winter rooster to crow for the second year in a row.
Then it had to pull a sleigh over the frozen, rugged mountain streams for 40 li at a stretch.

When it reached the logging site, there was no time to rest. It had to load over 2,000 geun of timber and return 40 li back.

My horse endured this brutal labor all winter, pulling heavy loads like a Russian freight train.
Winter in northern Manchuria was long, lasting from early April until the ice thawed in the lunar calendar.
Throughout those months, my horse suffered through this grueling work.

Day by day, as the workload increased, my horse's proud strength diminished.
By spring, when the ice thawed and the roads became slippery, pulling the sleigh became even more dangerous.

Every time, Gwan-seok mercilessly whipped my horse.
Eventually, even the clever horse lost its pride and resigned to its fate.
Not only that, but my horse's once-beautiful coat became ragged like a tattered funeral cloth.
Its body, once sleek and muscular, looked gaunt and scraped like a sharpened blade.
Its once-bright eyes sunk so deeply they could hold a cup of water, now clouded with cataracts.
Even its small, lively ears drooped lifelessly.

What is life?

In the end, my horse became a worn-out draft animal just to survive.

Was that my fault?
Was this not the destiny of those born as people without a country?

Through my own condition and through my beloved horse, I saw a reflection of myself.

After entrusting my horse to Gwan-seok, I was unable to focus on anything.
I spent the entire winter wandering anxiously between Palmyun-dong and Yeonggo Tower for no reason.
Several times a day, I wanted to visit my horse in Mokryeong but restrained myself.
If I went, it would only make my horse's work harder. I had no power to ease its suffering, so I chose to endure.

But when April came, I could no longer hold back.

Moreover, I had heard things from many people that I could not ignore. I could no longer leave my horse in that condition.

So I went to Mokryeong to find my horse.

Like many villages along the Jungdong Railway, Mokryeong was a mixed settlement of Chinese and Russian residents.
The Chinese living near Yubun River all spoke a little Russian, and Mokryeong was no exception.

There were railway employees' houses, a sawmill run by Russians, a hospital, and many shops. It was a place heavily influenced by the Russian Red government even within Manchuria.

I settled into the home of a Russian acquaintance I knew and went to visit Gwan-seok's house...

I went. Deep down, I had a feeling that a person named Jeong Gwan-seok wouldn't readily show me his horses. Still, I went hoping maybe, just maybe, I could catch a glimpse of them from a distance. After asking around here and there, I finally found Gwan-seok's house and knocked on the door.

To my surprise, when the door opened, it wasn't him who came out, but a young woman. She was tall and pale, with fair skin, and spoke with a Hamgyeong-do dialect. I immediately recognized that she must be Jeong Gwan-seok's wife and told her my intentions. The woman's face lit up as she invited me inside, but I didn't go in.

"Has your husband not come back yet? I came hoping to see the horses even just once, but…"

"Oh my, what should I do?" she said. "He's been away since about eleven last night. For two years now, whenever he cries at night, he just leaves the house. He comes home exhausted and collapses immediately. You know how hard it is for him. It's heartbreaking." She went on to say that if I wanted to see the horses, I'd have to come inside and wait.

"No, that's alright. I'll come back later."

"But why don't you stay at our place? Where else will you stay…?"

"Yes, actually, I've arranged to stay with a Russian acquaintance, so don't worry."

"Why on earth would you do that, when you have our home to stay at…"

Her voice was no mere polite formal greeting. There was genuine sincerity in her words.

"Though our place is humble, please make yourself comfortable."

"No, it's not about being polite. I chose a place that's convenient for me, so please don't worry."

Because I'm a soldier and have been on battlefields for a long time, I found myself unusually tongue-tied in front of such a young woman.

From the start, I worried that by showing up, I might cause them some psychological turmoil. Secondly, I didn't want to bother Jeong Gwan-seok himself or make him feel pressured to receive me, so I had arranged lodging in advance.

"Still, it must be hard on you to have me not feel at ease. Thanks to your care, we weren't affected by last year's bad harvest. We even managed to save up enough to repair the house. And we've saved some money for living expenses, too," she said honestly, clearly, and transparently.

“That’s very fortunate to hear.”

“But I feel ashamed not to be able to show you the horses. We did our best to care for them, but the work is tough, and they never got a single day of rest all winter. The horses aren’t in great shape,” she said with such pure sincerity that I almost couldn’t believe the horses were in poor condition.

Even hearing about their condition, I still couldn’t fully grasp the reality.

“Teacher, if you don’t come to our house, how would we feel? What if you didn’t stop for even one proper meal before leaving?” Her eyes were serious as she pressed me earnestly.

Finally, I laughed and said, “If that’s how it is, then I’ll come to have breakfast tomorrow.”

“We’ll be waiting for you. You should tell your husband to rest tomorrow, too. That way, you can meet the horses freely…”

I promised and returned to my lodging.

Back at my place, I smoked cigarette after cigarette, my mind stuck on that woman I had just met.

She was, after all, the wife of a nameless farmer. But until then, I had never met a woman so perfectly balanced in her figure, with such distinctive features, expressions, and speech — all without any affectation — and yet so genuinely kind. I had never met a woman who exuded such quiet grace and dignity.

A beautiful woman, whether she is someone’s wife or mother, simply cannot be anything less than beautiful.

The next morning, just around dawn, I left my lodging to receive breakfast.

Outside, it was still cold.

Occasionally, snowflakes fluttered down, and thick piles of snow lined both sides of the road.

For some reason, my spirits were high and my heart light. Eating a meal made by a beautiful woman was one thing, but the anticipation of seeing the horses made it even better.

As I approached Gwan-seok’s front door, I stamped my feet to shake the snow off my shoes.

Hearing the sound, the door opened, and she came out.

She spoke hurriedly:

“Sir, last night your husband came home late. When he heard you had come, he was very surprised and insisted he had to go out again to gather some firewood. The ice on the road was bad, and he ended up breaking half the wood he was carrying halfway there. But he couldn’t break his appointment with the company, so he had to go. Please forgive him…”

Suddenly, I felt all my strength drain away.

Somewhat gloomy, I said,

"Is that so? Well, it can’t be helped," I said as I turned to leave, but she insisted, "You agreed to have breakfast at our place, didn’t you? It’s all ready." She firmly pulled me inside her home. I had promised to eat there, and I thought refusing too much would be rude, so I went into the room.

As soon as I entered, she said, "Please wait a moment," and quickly went to the kitchen. From there, I heard the sound of her lighting the stove. Then, suddenly, a loud *thud* followed by a sharp cry, "Ah!" startled me. A bad feeling rushed over me, and I hurried to the kitchen, pushing the door open and asking, "Are you hurt? Where?"

She was covering one eye completely with her hand, but when she turned toward me and tried to smile, her expression twisted in pain, and her voice was weak and strained. Without thinking, I rushed to her side, saying, "Let me see."

"I'm fine, really," she said repeatedly, but couldn’t take her hand off her eye. Seeing this, I gently removed her hand and saw tears streaming down her face. When I looked closely, I was shocked beyond words.

What kind of change was this? Her eye — the once bright and sparkling eye — had gone completely white and blind. The impact of that moment would be unforgettable. My mind froze with a flood of conflicting thoughts, while I was overwhelmed by a crushing sense of guilt and responsibility.

Because of me, this young woman in the prime of her life had become disabled, losing the sight in one eye. I couldn’t stop thinking about all the consequences this would bring. I felt as if I could hear the shattering of their once happy family.

What was I? At that moment, I cursed my fate. I was a failed exile from the independence movement, filled with despair. I was powerless, uncertain of where I belonged. I was unable to even take care of the horses I cherished like my own breath, unable to command them in the battles where I had fought alongside legends like Spartak and Nikorsky. I was a reckless fool who had turned my warhorse into a mere pack mule, reduced to a simple laborer’s servant. And now, I had made another young wife into a cripple.

How could I endure this without giving up on myself? I had betrayed myself. I had betrayed the cause of the stateless revolutionary exile, betrayed the destiny that spared me from death in war.

I carried a mountain of unbearable grief, and in front of the blind eye of that young woman, what was I to do?

Yet even then, she tried hard to reassure me.

"Don’t worry. Please don’t be anxious. I will get some medicine, so stay calm."

I tried to give her strength, saying, "The eye has tears, so even if some sparks get in, it shouldn’t cause much harm."

I lied to comfort her.

She seemed to believe me and kept telling me not to worry. Then, without delay, I ran out, through the snowy street, to the train station hospital.

It was a small place, probably without an ophthalmologist on staff, but I wanted to believe they could help her.

"Please give medicine for an eye injury," I said, explaining the situation in detail.

The doctor, seemingly sympathetic to my plight, gave me some dark-colored liquid medicine and eye drops without a word.

When I returned to her house, her tears were still flowing, and though she tried to smile, her expression hadn’t changed.

I applied the medicine as the doctor instructed. I wanted to stay and care for her, but felt it would only make us both uncomfortable, so I decided to leave.

"There will be absolutely no problem. Apply the drops every two hours."

I repeated these words many times as I left her home.

Back at my lodging, I smoked cigarette after cigarette, spending the whole night wide awake with weary eyes.

As I stayed up through that long night, I offered countless prayers—ten thousand, a million—from the deepest part of my soul to a god whose existence I could not even be sure of.

Feeling just how weak and fragile human beings really are, I came to a renewed understanding of my own powerlessness and tried to rely solely on an almighty being.

At the break of dawn the next day, I rushed to Gwan-seok’s house. Perhaps my anxious footsteps echoed into the room, because the door suddenly swung wide open and she came running out to greet me.

Her face was radiant, full of brightness like a refreshing morning breeze. She ran toward me like the wind, and in a near-instinctive motion, wrapped one arm around my shoulder while using her other hand to open her once-blinded eye.

“See? It’s nothing. I’m fine,” she whispered softly, lowering her voice. Then she pointed back toward her house, covered her mouth with her hand, and gestured with her palm to say, “Don’t say anything.”

Understanding she didn’t want her husband to know anything about her eye, I silently looked at her in amazement.

It was a miracle.

The eye that had gone pale and sightless had, in just one night, completely healed and become clear. Even if the medicine had been extraordinary, could it truly have had such miraculous effects?

In the end, she had only wanted to avoid burdening her husband with unnecessary worry, so she asked me to stay silent.

Many years have passed since then. After that incident, I never had the opportunity to see Gwan-seok or his wife again.

But within me, an image of an unforgettable ideal of feminine beauty was forever etched, and that image was her.

Though she may have been just a simple farmer's wife, with no higher education to speak of, her naturally balanced figure, combined with her inner qualities—sincerity, honesty, gentleness, kindness, deep understanding, and above all, emotional depth and love—expressed themselves vividly.

She brought others endless comfort, joy, and even personal growth.

Even now, I still believe that the miracle she brought about came from nothing other than the power of her love.

3. Galina of the Wilderness

“Let’s head back.”

I turned my horse around as I spoke in Chinese to my orderlies, Chinese soldiers serving under me.

We were standing at the border between Manchuria and the Soviet Union. It was the early spring of 1925—though “spring” was in name only. It was still cold enough that we couldn’t take off our overcoats just yet.

At the time, I was serving as an inspector for General Zhang Zongchang's headquarters, one of the Chinese warlords overseeing the Manchurian-Soviet border region. I had come out to inspect the troop deployments along the border and was now returning to the headquarters in Pogranichnaya.

With several orderlies trailing behind me, I rode in silence, the sway of the saddle matching my heavy mood. I was depressed. During a battle in the Suifenhe area against Russian Revolutionary forces who had betrayed us, I had been wounded and evacuated to Yonggotap. While I was away, our Independence Army unit, en route to Palmentong for reorganization, lost its way and ended up near the Chinese Eastern Railway. There, they were disarmed by Chinese troops, not out of malice but misunderstanding. The unit scattered.

By the time I returned to Palmentong, I had become a stateless wanderer, a man without a country. I had no choice but to wait for the right time to regroup our forces—but rebuilding a military unit is no simple task. In the meantime, I had to figure out how to survive.

And I couldn't simply live as a civilian. I was a known leader of the Korean Independence Army, always being tracked by Japanese police and military. On top of that, my personality didn't suit a quiet life. I was a man of action, a soldier by profession. The only place I could lay low while waiting for my chance to rise again was within the military world.

Luckily, someone who knew my situation helped me out. His name was Ahn Yeoban.

Ahn Yeoban, a fellow Korean, was the brother-in-law of General Zhang Zongchang. How did a Korean become a Chinese warlord's brother-in-law?

At the time, many Chinese warlords practiced polygamy. Among them, General Zhang's many wives were infamous, and his seventh wife happened to be a Korean woman. Her brother was none other than Ahn Yeoban.

Thanks to Ahn, I was able to become a member of General Zhang's headquarters staff. Life in the Chinese military was, for the most part, comfortable. But my spirit was restless. As long as I had ideals and a mission, I couldn't find meaning in this temporary life. Every day felt stifling and gloomy.

Back then, my drinking worsened—I could hardly get through a single day without alcohol.

Although I went by the alias Yoon Hyung-kwon, I never hid that I was Korean.

At that time along the Manchurian-Soviet border, the Russian Far Eastern Army—emboldened by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution—frequently provoked border skirmishes. Military and diplomatic clashes between the two nations were constant, and the entire region felt like a powder keg ready to explode.

Having completed my inspection and found nothing out of the ordinary, I turned my horse back toward headquarters, swaying in the saddle as I was once again flooded with a deep sense of loneliness about my situation.

We had joined the Russian Revolutionary forces in pursuit of Korean independence, hoping for international support. We had fought the White Army and, at times, even Japanese forces—victory after victory. But when the dawn came, like morning dew, it all vanished. Betrayed by our supposed allies, I was left burning with anger once again.

Just yesterday, those comrades-in-arms who had shared every hardship with us turned overnight into mortal enemies. When they stood before us with weapons drawn, I swore eternal revenge. That's when my anti-communist conviction took root, deep and unshakable.

In the tragedy of exchanging artillery fire with yesterday's comrades, we crossed back into Manchuria. But what awaited us was the bitter humiliation of forced disarmament. Every plan we had so carefully built collapsed. Our lives were turned completely upside down.

I lost everything in an instant—military life, armed struggle, the bonds forged with the people—and was reduced to nothing more than a lonely wanderer on the open plains of a foreign land. At age twenty-six, full of burning youth, I was left with nothing but the clothes on my back, depending on the very Chinese army that had disarmed us just to survive.

How could such a reality be anything but heartbreaking?

Our horses arrived at the barren wilderness of Shemotun.

The moon was bright that night, lighting our path so well the horses barely had to search for footing.

The spring moon of the northern lands was bright—brighter than any autumn moon, with not even a halo around it.

Under that moonlight, my desolate circumstances felt all the more tragic.

Suddenly, I pulled my horse to a stop, startled by something.

I tilted my ear toward the wind.

Carried on the breeze that swept across the wilderness, I thought I heard a woman sobbing.

At first, I thought it was a hallucination. But the sound grew clearer, closer.

"Do you hear that? Sounds like a woman crying…"

I turned to my orderly and asked.

“Yes, I hear it,” he answered with a wary look in his eyes.

“What kind of woman would be out here at this hour?”

Just then, I spotted a dark silhouette on the horizon where the rolling plain met the sky.

“There she is!”

One of the orderlies shouted, and we all spurred our horses and rode toward the figure.

Under the moonlight, we found a woman in her twenties, walking and sobbing.

She had her long hair down, tears streaming down her face as she looked up at us.

Looking down at her from my horse, I was stunned.

As she brushed her hair back and gazed up at me, lit by the moon, she looked almost otherworldly—too beautiful to belong to this world.

What was such a young and beautiful woman doing alone, weeping in this godforsaken wilderness?

Unable to suppress the mix of curiosity and concern rising inside me, I asked,

“Who are you, and what’s happened to make you cry like this?”

When I asked in Russian, she answered,

“My name is Galina. I came from Nikolsk to look for my brother.”

Her voice shook with grief as she continued.

Galina’s brother had been a captain in the White Army.

After repeated defeats against the Red Army, he retreated and eventually crossed the border into the direction of Pogranichnaya with his remaining troops.

Hearing that news through rumors, Galina had come here to find him. But his whereabouts were unknown.

Galina…

(*The story continues*)

Of course I went to that party. It was a gathering of Russians, so maybe I thought I could hear some news about my brother. Or maybe I just wanted to be around other Russians for the first time in a while, to shake off the homesickness and loneliness that had been eating at me.

I was feeling hopeless when I got there, and I didn't turn down any drinks. I kept drinking whatever they handed me, and before I knew it, I was completely wasted.

Somewhere in the middle of all that—though I don't even know whose place it was—I ended up getting robbed. Someone stole a wad of cash I'd hidden deep in my coat lining. It was enough to live on for a whole year. For me, it was everything I had.

She had sewn it into the seams of her coat, right along the collar and cuffs. But when she sobered up a bit and checked, it was all gone—every last penny. Gone like it had never been there, stolen right off her body without her noticing a thing.

"Look at this," she said. "Isn't this what I get for trying to save a little something in public housing?"

She held out her coat for me to see, the threads frayed and coming loose around the collar and sleeves. It was made of fake leather. I couldn't take it—watching this girl, in a foreign land, robbed of her last bit of money, pouring her heart out to a complete stranger she'd just met in the wilderness. It tore me up.

What made it worse was that just the other day, I'd been chasing her people down. As part of the White Army, we'd been hot on their heels, swords drawn, giving them no room to breathe. And now here I was, facing the sister of one of them.

That silky, flowing hair. That innocent skin. Those wide, earnest eyes full of fear and uncertainty. A lily blooming in a savage wasteland. I felt something stir inside me—a raw, human sympathy for someone who, in many ways, wasn't so different from me.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "Is there any way I can get my money back?"

I told her to report it to the Chinese police right away. But I was honest with myself—I knew the chances of recovering her money were less than one in ten.

"I don't know a single person around here," she said. "Until I find the money... can you help me? Just until I get back on my feet?"

That innocent look in her eyes as she asked—if she had met someone cruel instead of me, a man with a predator's heart... what would've happened to her?

Galina wasn't my compatriot. She was a Slavic woman from Siberia, a child of that frozen land. I was a Korean, a former soldier who had once aimed my gun at her people—exiles fighting for their own cause.

But in that moment, all of that disappeared. I felt like she was my own little sister, someone I shared blood with.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll go to the police station right away.”

“Hey, wait,” I stopped her. “It’s almost midnight, and we’re less than five kilometers from the border. This area’s dangerous right now. The tension’s high. It’s not safe for a young woman to be out this late, especially when you still reek of booze. Go home tonight. If you run into trouble tomorrow, come find me.” I gave her the address of my unit.

She understood right away.

“Please, sir,” she said. “I’ve had such a shock today. Everything feels terrifying right now. Maybe I could cry earlier because I was still drunk, and I could walk alone... but now, I’m scared out of my mind. Can you please walk me back to my place? I’m begging you.”

Even under the moonlight, I could see how terrified she was. Her big eyes were filled with fear.

“You have a place to stay?”

After a short pause, she answered, “18 Moskovskaya Street.”

Galina, even now I still remember your address clearly.

I got off my horse. One of the Chinese orderlies nearby, who didn’t understand a word of what we were saying, stared at us blankly as I handed him the reins.

“I’m on duty, but I’ll take her home,” I told him. “It’s important.”

Galina looked at me with eyes full of gratitude and thanked me over and over.

As we walked, we talked openly about ourselves. She got to understand why a Korean like me was serving as an officer in the Chinese Nationalist Army. By the time we got to her place, we’d talked through everything.

And then, we parted ways outside her lodging.

The next afternoon.
I was surprised when I received an introduction letter from Wi Byung and saw a beautiful woman enter my office.
Looking closely, I realized it was Galina from the night before. But it was hard to believe she was the same Galina who had been crying uncontrollably with her hair disheveled in the wilderness. Today, she was stunning in a completely different way.

Galina had been beautiful even the night before, enough to captivate my heart.
But today, her beauty had a different kind of angle.

If last night's Galina was wild and untamed, then today's Galina was refined, brimming with intelligence and grace.

It was the first time I realized, through Galina, that a woman could possess and express two such contrasting forms of beauty.
She was neatly dressed, her makeup carefully applied, and every movement she made was smooth and natural. She radiated elegance and feminine refinement.

She told me she'd done as I instructed and reported everything to the police. She thanked me once again for helping her the night before.

"When I woke up this morning and thought about what could've happened if you hadn't been there, I got chills down my spine,"
she said, flashing a bright, pure smile.

"I was hesitant to come to a place like this as a woman, but I just wanted to thank you again. And, well, I also wanted to see what kind of place your office was."

Galina acted as if she'd completely erased the miserable events of the night before. Not once did she mention the misfortune she'd endured.

"I think I've found a job,"
she said.
I couldn't hide my delight.

"Oh, that's the best news I've heard! Where at?"
"I just went to the train station without a plan, and wouldn't you know it—there was an opening for a typist!"

"That's great. So, are you good at typing?"
"Oh, I manage."

Every little detail about how she spoke and moved satisfied me.
It felt like she was filling the emptiness in my heart completely.

She had glossy coffee-colored hair, big brown eyes, and lips whose outline was as precise and beautiful as a sculpture.
She was a lovely young woman.

Would it be an exaggeration to say that our reunion marked the beginning—or rather the middle—of our love?
In truth, we were just two lonely people, each holding an empty vessel ready to be filled with love, who had found in each other the perfect fit.

Given our circumstances, it felt natural that our affection for one another had ignited so suddenly and completely.

I was an exile, cast out from my homeland and living each day in bitter disappointment, alone in a foreign land.
And she, too, was a displaced young woman, wandering alone after being banished from her own country.

Two people, both fighting loneliness under the same conditions, drawn to each other as man and woman.

Eventually, we became lovers, living together at her address: 18 Moskovskaya Street.
Galina had also secured the typist job and lived every day with the joy of someone who felt she was the happiest woman in the world.

It was a time of complete immersion.
For three months, our love transcended every misunderstanding and outside calculation.
In a space free of complaints and constraints, we spent nearly a hundred days as if we could melt even the ice of northern Siberia.

But everything in this world must come to an end.
So too did our relationship.
And it came to an end so suddenly.

One day, while I was deeply immersed in my work and thoughts of Galina, a telegram was delivered to my office.
It was from General Kim Jwa-jin in Yeonggotap.

He said there was something urgent he needed to discuss with me and asked me to come immediately.
I already knew what he was working on over there: the reformation of our disbanded independence army.

And knowing his character, which I deeply trusted, I was sure of one thing—
If it were something anyone else could do, he would never have sent that telegram to me.
He sent it because it had to be me.

There was another thing I was certain of:
No matter what kind of life I was living, I was not the kind of person who would break a promise to him or betray our bond.
No matter how sweet the love I was buried in, I was not someone who would abandon the mission carved into my very bones.

General Kim Jwa-jin was more than just a comrade.
He was my senior, someone essential to fulfilling my mission. He was the light guiding my path.

Just three months ago, I would’ve dropped everything and rushed to Yeonggotap with burning passion, leaving behind any fear or hesitation.

How exhilarating it would have been to escape from the despair that had closed in on all sides!

But now… I had Galina.
To leave her behind—
Galina, the beautiful and lonely one—I had to leave her.

But how could I leave her alone and go on my own?
My beloved Galina!

I found myself locked in a fierce battle with another version of myself inside me.
A brutal clash between my emotional self and my duty-bound self transformed me in an instant into someone I barely recognized.

But I knew, without question, that I had to overcome the emotional self.
The thought of leaving the fragile Galina behind made my blood run cold.

If only she had the slightest assurance that the brother she was looking for was still alive somewhere,
I wouldn't have felt this tormented.

But the only person she believed in now, the only one she could rely on in this vast world,
was me—a man of a completely different race.

Still, the decision had to be made.
And when it came, it came like the swing of an executioner's sword.
I had to go.

But I couldn't bear the thought of saying goodbye while looking at her face.
Even so, just once—I wanted to see her face one last time before I left.
But no, that would be impossible.

The moment I saw her, I wouldn't be able to control what might happen to me.

In the end, I had no choice but to leave without seeing her at all.
It was a grim, brutal decision—
like the one made before charging into the enemy lines with 1,200 cavalry at the Tsarskaya Station.

And so,
I left Bogranychina,
leaving Galina behind.

There were only about five hours left until Haerim at 08:00, but to me, sitting on the train, it felt like five years—terrifyingly long.

After getting off at Haerim Station, I boarded a tangcha pulled by three horses and headed toward Yeonggotap.
Though the distance from Haerim to Yeonggotap took only four hours by tangcha, it was just as unbearably dull and agonizing as the time on the train.

In my mind, there was nothing but thoughts of Galina.
On one hand, my heart was seared with longing and affection for her. But on the other hand, I also felt a bitter sense of grim satisfaction for having severed the thread of fate tying me to her in one clean cut.
Yet, what continued to gnaw at me unbearably was the guilt I felt toward Galina.
Without a single word, I had vanished overnight. Galina would never forgive me for that.
As a young woman who hadn't lived much of life, she couldn't possibly understand my position.
And where there is no understanding, how can there be courage?

How would Galina, with her untainted heart as pure as the petals of a lily, live through those long days and nights, her heart stained with a crimson wound left by me?
If she hadn't been such a pure and innocent girl, perhaps my guilt would've been lessened...

It was now spring. The deeply frozen northern land had finally begun to thaw, and the wheels of the tangcha repeatedly sank and got stuck in the springy mud holes.
Those wheels being sucked into the mud, dragged downward, looked just like me struggling to free myself from the memories of Galina—memories that gripped me like quicksand.

At Yeonggotap, Colonel Kim's mission had progressed about 70 percent but had since stalled.
To break free from that deadlock, he had summoned me there.

Eventually, I managed to act as Colonel Kim's right-hand man to full effect, and we succeeded in securing land in Samchagu, Dongnyeong County, for the establishment of a military academy.

By then, three months had already passed.
At last, having achieved our goal, Colonel Kim and I set out to scout a location to train troops once the academy was built.

The route we were to take was the same one I had taken when I first left Poguranichnaya for Yeonggotap, only now we were traveling it in reverse.
Back then, my starting point had been Ocham, but now our destination was Yukcham—and the distance between Yukcham and Ocham was no more than sixty *li*.
We each packed a single bundle and set off on the journey.

As we began retracing the path I had taken while consumed with thoughts of Galina, her memories, long sunken like sediment in the depths of my heart, suddenly surged up again.

But as they say, time is the best medicine. The once sharply painful memories of Galina now seemed like the fragrance of nostalgia, gently soothing my weary, aching heart.

Before reaching Yukcham, we had to get off the train at Magyohwa, a midpoint.
We were supposed to meet Mr. Heo, a fellow countryman tasked with liaising for our mission.

Magyohwa, like Mokryeong, was a town with a large Russian population.
Around the Magyohwa Station, there were several Russian-run department stores, bars, and restaurants.

After discussing matters with Mr. Heo and finishing dinner at his house, Colonel Kim suddenly said,

“Hey Cheol-gi, how about we go see the nightlife?”

Even before the Galina incident, I had been drinking heavily. But Colonel Kim couldn’t handle even a sip of alcohol.

His suggestion had a certain sentimentality to it—the kind of wistful, romantic impulse that creeps up on men once they’re out on the road.
But more than anything, I could tell he made the suggestion to lift my spirits, which had been unusually low that day.

I wanted to drink freely for the first time in a while.

We went to a Russian bar near the train station.
As we entered the bar and saw the overly wide and empty hall, I instinctively took a step back from the cold, desolate atmosphere.

“Why’s it so dead in here?” I muttered like a grumbling Russian.

“It’s only six-thirty. I guess it's too early for drinking. Let’s order a drink—more customers will show up soon,” he said as he took a seat, though something seemed off about his mood, too.

People don’t go to bars just for the booze—they go for the mood that makes drinking easier.

But in this place, there were only two or three other patrons besides us, and the atmosphere was so lifeless it killed any desire to drink.
We reluctantly ordered a half-bottle of vodka and a small plate of shchi.

We just planned to have a quick drink and head back.

The Russian madam, a middle-aged woman, shouted into the back for someone to bring our order.

A little later, a gaunt young woman appeared carrying a tray with the vodka and soup.

She wore flamboyant clothes that made it obvious she worked at the bar, but her face was so dark and miserable she looked like a widow in mourning clothes.

Her eyes, void of hope, hung limply toward the tray, and her loosely pinned-up hair seemed painfully out of place with her outfit, making her all the more pitiful.

She walked across the empty hall toward our table.

Suddenly, I felt the blood drain from my face.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from her. My gaze froze solid, locked on her like stone.

Perhaps she felt the heavy weight of my stare, for as she approached with her eyes cast down toward the tray, she suddenly lifted her head.
And then—she saw me.

She stared blankly at me for a long time. In her eyes, there was no shock.
No anger.
No curse.
No hatred.

Her gaze just lingered on me, as though trying to confirm the image projected onto her retina—nothing more, nothing less.

"Galina!"
I almost called out her name.
But before I could, she quietly disappeared somewhere, having set down the tray she was holding on the empty table in front of her.

"What just happened?"
Sensing the change in my expression, Captain Kim immediately fired off question after question.
I just sat there, like a stone Buddha.

"Hey, Cheol-gi, what's going on? Who was that? Are you talking about that woman earlier?"
"She's someone I know well."
That was all I could say after a long pause.
But then I started thinking again.
Maybe she wasn't Galina after all. Maybe she was just someone who looked like her.
Could Galina really have become that unrecognizable, that gaunt?

I called over the madam.
"Ma'am, I know it's a lot to ask, but I'd really like to see that woman just once more..."
The moment I finished speaking, the madam turned her head and shouted into the back room, "Galina!"

Sure enough, it was her.
My poor Galina...

No matter how many times the madam called her, there was no response from inside.
Perhaps realizing something was going on between us, the madam offered gently,
“I’ll try to talk to her tonight and persuade her. Please, come back tomorrow in the afternoon. I’ll make sure you can see her.”

I felt ashamed just standing there with the madam.
I left behind a few words, thanking her and saying I’d really appreciate it, paid for the drinks I hadn’t even touched, and walked out.

On the walk from the bar back to the lodging house, I couldn’t say a single word to Captain Kim about what had just happened.
But once we were back, I told him everything in detail.

“Hm... so that’s what happened.”
He looked up at the ceiling, as if deeply moved, then pulled something out from inside his coat and pushed it toward me.
It was money. 47 won.

“Go to 61st Street right now and apologize,” he said solemnly, handing me the money like he was issuing a command.

I stared at his face, confused.
I knew for a fact that the total amount of money Captain Kim had set aside for this trip was 60 won.
With that 60 won, we had to buy train tickets from Magyohwa to Yukcham, and then take a freight cart 160 ri (about 63 kilometers) from Yukcham to Samchagu.
And freight cart drivers don’t give free rides.

On top of that, back in his youth, Captain Kim had taken a lot of mercury-based medicine for his chronic diarrhea, which had badly affected his legs.
They would swell up like logs if he walked for too long.
He could sprint 100 ri in a rush if necessary, but couldn’t even walk 50 ri at a normal pace.

If we couldn’t catch a ride from Yukcham to Samchagu, we would have to walk those 160 ri on a muddy road, our legs sinking up to the knees, dragging our blankets and belongings, for three days and nights.

So I couldn’t accept the money. I politely refused, insisting I didn’t need it.
But I did promise to go see her and apologize.

Still, he was a man of boundless compassion and understanding for people and the world.

“Think about it, Cheol-gi. Just how desperate must she be to end up in a place like that, serving drinks?
Whatever the reason, you were the cause of it.

You might say she accepted your decision and moved on with her life, but think about how things were for her after you left.

You say you tried to explain everything with words, but what she needs right now isn't someone who understands her —
She needs someone who can pull her out of the hell she's living in. That's what matters.
So do as I say."

His reasoning was painfully clear, and his tone — both heartfelt and solemn — left me with no room to resist.

In the end, I had no choice but to take the money and go see her.

Thanks to near-begging on my part and the madam's effort, I was finally able to meet her.
We sat face to face in a dark corner of the bar — the first time in three months.

The smoke from her cigarette curled upward, as if silently declaring the misery of our separation.

"I thought you had gone missing. I was searching like crazy for you.
Maybe I was born under some kind of curse, to always be looking for someone.
"Back when I first met you, I was running around like a crazy person looking for the man I loved. Then again, later, I chased after someone else…"
Now I've given up. I drink, I smoke, I've become that kind of woman."

She gave a lonely smile.
"Galina... I have nothing to say."

"But I understand you. I really do.
I've got so much debt in this place, I'll probably never be able to get out of it.
Still, believe me — not once have I forgotten you.
And I never will."

My chest felt like it was being crushed.
Galina recoiled from the money I handed her as if it were something terrifying, refusing again and again to take it.

"Galina, please take it — not for the money, but as a sign that you forgive me.
If you won't even accept this, I won't be able to leave you.
Please, don't hurt me any more than this.
Even if it's just this small gesture, please accept it as my sincerity."

At last, Galina began to cry — tears pouring down like a sudden storm — and took the money.

"Galina! Take care. Please, be well!"
Her thin hand trembled as it grasped mine.

That trembling — it clamped down on my heart like a vise.
There wasn’t a single corner of my body that didn’t feel that pain.

The next day, Captain Kim and I left Magyohwa Station — where Galina remained — and boarded the train to Yukcham.

The clearer the end to my relationship with Galina became, the deeper the sorrow sank in.
But strangely, my heart felt lighter.
That was thanks to Captain Kim’s 47 won.

Back then, 47 won was enough for someone to live modestly for a year and a half.
I didn’t believe that money had cleared the emotional debt I owed Galina,
but it had saved me — it was a redemption from the purgatory of my own guilt.

When we arrived in Yukcham, we no longer had money for a freight cart.

Not wanting to burden me, Captain Kim — despite being older and weaker — carried our bundles on his back,
walking the sticky, muddy road with his knees sinking deep into the mire.

His legs, already damaged by mercury poisoning, swelled like tree trunks.

It was the height of a scorching summer day.
He had given up his remaining money because of me, and walked that brutal road without complaint —
yet still, all he worried about was not making me feel guilty.

Three years later, in a certain autumn, I...

4. Maria in the Snares of Yaluhe *(※ Title Note)*

When the blazing sun ushers in the month of August, out of the countless memories of my past, the events of August 1927 return with startling clarity. That experience remains etched in my mind as an unbearably painful memory.

I suppose it's because it took place during one of the darkest, most hopeless periods I’ve ever endured—far more severe than any other extreme situation I’ve faced.

In the late 1920s, I lived through a period of primitive survival in a remote mountain valley called Hallasu, located in the western branch of the Eastern Manchurian Railway near the wild and desolate Daeheung-an Range—considered desolate even by Manchurian standards. I was there with my wife, Maria, fleeing from the ruthless manhunt of the puppet government of Manchukuo.

As the Japanese Empire, driven by its ravenous appetite for Eastern conquest, rapidly expanded its presence across the vast lands of Manchuria, even our fellow Korean compatriots living in the

cities began adopting pro-Japanese attitudes overnight. Meanwhile, the Russian communists, sensing opportunity amidst the despair and disintegration of our nationalist forces, began to infiltrate rural Korean communities with persistent tenacity, binding our people into their red organizations.

Burning with righteous anger, I and the remaining independence fighters—our battered strength united under the tattered banner of the Goryeo Revolutionary Corps—fought tooth and nail to resist both Japanese imperialism and Russian communism. I was the leader of the unit and poured every last ounce of strength into that fight. But in the harsh terrain of Manchuria, even our fiercest cries—so powerful they could silence a crying child—eventually faded into nothingness.

Repeated losses of comrades and the complete depletion of supplies wore us down. Our once towering spirit was reduced to a faint echo, like the fading glow of a sunset, and in the end, we fell into a state of hopeless despair, unable to recover.

With only a handful of comrades left, I led our group through Dongheung and Mokran, eventually deciding to make one last gamble. I dispatched four of my most trusted comrades—Baek Unbong, Kim Chang-deok, and two others—on a final mission into enemy territory.

The outcome of this mission would not only determine the survival or collapse of our unit, but in truth, it could be said to represent the last decisive turning point for the entire armed Korean nationalist movement in Manchuria. That is not an exaggeration.

However, the four of them missed their return dates—first, second, and even the third—remaining completely out of contact. They had vanished without a trace.

After searching every possible avenue for information, we eventually learned that the mission had failed completely. Overcome with shame and unable to face us again, they had gone into hiding somewhere we couldn't reach. I came to realize that our grand plans had all collapsed into utter futility.

After several sleepless nights of agonizing deliberation, I even considered abandoning everything and heading south like General Yi Cheong-cheon to seek out the Provisional Government in Shanghai. But for me, that too was an impossible dream.

My appearance was already well-known across Manchuria, and no matter how fluent my Chinese might have been, there was simply no way I could pass through the South Manchurian Railway. Without access to the rail lines, escaping Manchuria was utterly out of the question.

That railway was under Japanese military control, and I was one of their top targets. Using it was not an option.

Worse still, it wasn’t just the Japanese who were hunting me. Even my fellow Koreans under communist leadership viewed me as a threat. What was more damning, the ruling authority of

Manchuria at the time, the Zhang Xueliang regime, had placed a hefty bounty on my head, issuing an all-points bulletin for my arrest.

Yun Hyeong-gwon—that was the alias I used. But how had I come to earn even the hatred of Zhang Xueliang's regime?

To explain that, I need to recount the following story.

After the ruler of Manchuria, Zhang Zuolin, was assassinated by Japanese agents in the Huanggutun Incident, his son Zhang Xueliang inherited the regime. At the time, it was unclear whether he would support China's national unification front. Thus, General Yu Sang-pung, who held a high position in the National Revolutionary Army led by Chiang Kai-shek, sent a secret emissary named Gong Pae-seong—a Chinese revolutionary—to Manchuria to contact General Kim Jwa-jin.

From that meeting, we in the Korean nationalist movement reached the conclusion that all possible means must be used to persuade Zhang Xueliang to join the Chinese unification front. That meant we needed to apply pressure on his regime.

But our strength alone was far too limited to do so. Therefore, we had no choice but to form a temporary alliance with a local Manchurian bandit group—called "majeok"—and bring in a military warlord to launch armed operations along the eastern branch of the Chinese Eastern Railway.

As a first step, we gathered about 7,000 bandit fighters in a place called Weihe, near Yaluhe Station.

Through the introduction of General Kim Jwa-jin, I secretly entered the headquarters of the Ma faction in Wei Tangkou and began working actively as a military advisor and liaison officer.

Just then, Zhang Xueliang, who had obtained intelligence about this, saw it as a serious threat. He dispatched one of his most trusted men—Commander Noh (#), who led an elite battalion of Zhang's Northeastern Army—to attack Wei Tangkou.

However, contrary to their usual disdain for the Ma faction, they turned out to be unexpectedly strong. In a surprising turn, they annihilated Commander Noh and his entire battalion.

In retaliation, Zhang Xueliang put a large bounty on the head of Yoon Hyung-gwon, the man he resented deeply.

For me, who was already planning to escape from Manchuria, this incident was catastrophic. I became nothing more than a helpless fish flailing to avoid the net closing in on me from all sides.

In such a dire situation, there were only two options left for me: surrender or suicide; the other option was to find an uninhabited wilderness—some remote primitive area—where I could hide and wait for the right opportunity.

But surrender was not even something I could entertain, so I had no choice but to choose the second path.

Once I made up my mind, I spread out a detailed topographic map and looked for a place far removed from any settlements or roads. Eventually, I chose a region called "Algun" in the northwestern part of Heilongjiang Province, not far from the Russian border, as my hideout.

Having settled on Algun as my destination, I had no time to hesitate. I had to cast aside all human attachments and lingering regrets, and set out without even a faint prediction of what fate awaited me.

My heart was heavy and unsettled. It was only at that moment that I fully realized the enormous weight of responsibility I felt toward my wife.

It may not have been purely out of affection or love for my wife, Maria, but more because of the concern I felt for her lonely situation. Maria had lost her entire family—37 people—in the wake of the Russian Revolution. The only person possibly still alive was a younger sister whose whereabouts were vaguely rumored.

Maria had no one else in the entire world but me. Knowing that, how could I just leave her behind? Yet I had no choice but to go, because my life was in imminent danger.

I couldn't keep my thoughts to myself—I had to confide in my wife, and no one else. Maria, as my wife, was prepared to transcend even death. She would not waver in the face of my decision. On the contrary, she only made my resolve even stronger.

I told Maria to wait for my message after I left, and to go to the house of a White Russian in the Harbin church—a man we had come to know during our earlier weapons purchases.

"I understand. Don't worry—just go," Maria said, in a tone meant to give me courage.

Leaving Maria behind, I set out on foot toward Algun. It was the middle of winter.

In truth, our household life had none of the basic four necessities—food, clothing, housing, or transportation. But this wasn't just our case. For any revolutionary active in Manchuria who wasn't a local, it was the same.

We stayed in borrowed homes, wore only what we had on, ate whatever was available, and didn't even own a bicycle. If we had anything, it was only the burning blood in our hearts, maybe a pistol, and two or three grenades.

Our lifestyle was always on the move. That made it easier to stay active without being held back. So my journey to an unknown, faraway place was extremely simple. I had to avoid the eyes of the Manchurian military, so I couldn't even consider taking a train. I had no choice but to travel by foot.

To protect myself from the freezing Manchurian wind, I wore a thick Russian worker's jacket, Chinese-style pants, and winter boots called *tangtunu*—a special kind of snowshoe made only in Manchuria, with a felt lining inside.

Underneath the hem of my jacket, I secretly strapped a loaded pistol. But from the outside, I looked exactly like a poor laborer working on the Chinese Eastern Railway.

Following the map, I walked for several days. It was a grueling and despair-filled journey. After some days, I reached the railway line. Then I followed the tracks for several more days. At night, I would sleep haphazardly in roadside inns or carriage houses.

Eventually, I passed through Nangnangchi Station, the gateway to the provincial capital Qiqihar in Heilongjiang. I also passed through Hulan'erchi Station, a place known for its tragic wartime stories. From there, I entered the famous Daxinganling mountain range.

From that point on, people became increasingly scarce. It was rare to even see a single traveler on the road.

Along the way, I passed through Qiqihar and Nangnangchi, areas with large Korean communities. My heart longed for my fellow countrymen, and I badly wanted to stop by. But those two towns were also places where the Japanese police operated freely.

Even if I could find someone there to work with, many of the Koreans in those towns had already succumbed to the humiliating survival tactics of a ruined nation. They had sided with the Japanese police, becoming opium dealers or brothel owners, living lives of moral decay.

It was best not even to make eye contact with those kinds of bastards, let alone run into them, so I suppressed my homesick longing for fellow Koreans and passed the area from a distance.

I walked for a few more days, passed through Nönzŭ Mountain, and then through Zhalantun.

Zhalantun, located on the western branch of the Chinese Eastern Railway, is known as the biggest summer retreat for Russians. It is a beautiful region often called the "North Manchurian Park."

After passing Zhalantun and walking another eight miles or so, the sky, which had been heavily overcast since morning with a dull leaden color, began to grow darker and darker. Before I knew it, the sparse snowflakes that had started falling turned into a full-blown blizzard in a matter of minutes.

The fine, powdery snow unique to this region was swept along by a fierce wind, and the temperature dropped to a bitter -30°C (-22°F). The snow stuck to my eyebrows and lashes, freezing them together, and visibility dropped so drastically that I could no longer make out the road even a step ahead.

Left with no choice, I crouched into a ditch beneath a railroad bridge, gathered some dry twigs, started a fire, and thawed out my frozen limbs. After about two hours, the blizzard finally began to subside and the temperature seemed to ease slightly, though the snowflakes still whirled through the air.

According to my rough calculations, I still had another 16 miles to the next station, so I braved the swirling snow and began walking again.

Everything around me was covered in snow and looked the same, making it impossible to tell where I was. At times, I sank into snow up to my shins, while in other places the ground was slick like dry pavement, covered in ice.

My cheeks stung like they had been sliced with knives before going completely numb, and my legs were so worn out they could barely carry me. Yet I kept going.

And then, through the white veil of snow, faint outlines of mountain peaks appeared on either side. There was something strangely mysterious and beautiful about this particular view, unlike anywhere else I had passed on my journey so far.

It was a breathtaking scene unlike anything I'd seen in all of Manchuria or even Siberia.

I kept walking. Just before reaching Halla Station, about eight miles southeast of it, I passed a village called Sungja Dyingz. After walking another two or three miles, I found myself surrounded by white, from the mountains to the fields and even the forests stretching out before me. Everything was buried in snow.

I stopped for a moment in the middle of the path, and saw something unusual: on a hillside slope to the north where the wind had swept away the snow, exposing a reddish patch of earth, a few sparse pine trees stood.

The red earth and green pine trees, sights I hadn’t seen in ages, triggered a powerful wave of homesickness in me.

Overcome with emotion, I found myself walking up to a nearby Chinese house, where the pine trees stood, and knocking on the door without even thinking.

"I'm just a traveler passing through," I said. "This place looks so much like my hometown that I had to ask… Could you tell me the name of this mountain or area?"

The Chinese man replied that he didn’t know the specific name of the mountain or the place, but that the valley stream running around it was called “Yaluhe (鸭绿河).”

"Yaluhe?"

I was stunned beyond words.

"Yaluhe"—in Chinese pronunciation, it sounded exactly like *our* "Amnokgang" (Yalu River), except for the difference between “river” and “stream.”

“Yes, it’s called Yaluhe,” the man repeated, seemingly indifferent to my surprise.

I felt a mix of resentment toward the cruel tricks of fate and deep gratitude toward the Creator’s kindness.

To a wanderer without a country, to show a glimpse of the homeland I could never forget even in my dreams, and to reveal even its name—right here, in this strange land—it felt like a divine revelation.

It was as if I were hearing an invisible voice say, “You will never set foot on your homeland again. So let this place be where you soothe your longing.”

I could not take another step past that spot.

That day, I asked the owner of a nearby Chinese house if I could stay the night, and he kindly agreed.

That night, unable to sleep, my mind was lost in thoughts. And when dawn came, I made a firm decision.

I would settle here. I would bring Maria here.

Resolute in my choice, I set out the next day back to Songga Ziyongzha to find Maria.

From there, I sent her a letter, telling her to come immediately.

What had taken me fifteen days to walk, she arrived at in just fifteen or sixteen hours by train.

I met Maria at the Zhalantun station, carrying only a small bundle, and we began walking back together toward Songga Ziyongzha.

Luckily, the deep winter gorge of Daheung-anryŏng was clear and bright that day—something rare—and Maria and I walked while exchanging stories, making up for lost time. We didn’t even notice the fatigue, and the road didn’t feel nearly as long as when I had come alone.

The scenery around us was cheerful and refreshing, so different from the blizzard I had trudged through days earlier that I found the contrast deeply satisfying.

We settled in Hallasu.

The Hallasu station reminded me of Chupungnyeong Station right after Korea's liberation. In front of the small station building were a few clustered Russian and Chinese houses, no more than three or four each.

To discuss how we'd settle down, we first entered a Chinese shop with a sign reading "Bokpoonghang" (Lucky Wind Shop).

Inside, a Chinese man who appeared to be the owner was in the middle of a transaction with a Russian. But they couldn't communicate well, fumbling awkwardly in a mixture of broken Chinese and Russian.

There was a Russian document laid out between them. Unable to watch them struggle any longer, Maria stepped in, translated the document, and helped them communicate the missing words. Their surprise and gratitude were immense.

The business concluded successfully, the Russian left, and the owner offered us tea.

We sat around a brazier and introduced ourselves.

The burly, hearty Chinese owner was a man named Jeon, a Shandong native in his 40s.

At the time, I still wore glasses and had long hair. I gave him my alias—Kim Gwang-du—for our first greeting.

"You look like a laborer by appearance," he said, "but something tells me you're not quite an ordinary laborer…"

Mr. Jeon seemed genuinely curious about my identity. Left with no choice, I said,
"I'll leave it to you to decide what I've done, what I'm trying to do, where I came from, and where I'm going. But the reason I sought you out is simple — I want to settle down here, and I wanted to know if you'd be willing to help me. I have no money, and I don't have a place to stay. If you're someone who's willing to help a person in such a difficult situation, then please help me."
With that, I laid everything out bluntly and directly.

I sincerely thought that if he helped me, I would be fully grateful to him — though I didn't say it out loud.

Even now, I take pride in the fact that the Chinese I speak is elegant enough that any native Chinese person could tell in just a few words. Whatever he saw in me, Mr. Jeon immediately and gladly accepted my request without hesitation.

His store was small, but it was relatively well stocked with essentials, and he even offered me a place to stay.

"Until you can stand on your own, I'll provide everything you need,"
said Mr. Jeon.

He promised to provide me with everything I asked for. But all I requested was millet, salt, some potatoes, and a few tools like an axe and a saw.

At the time, I was absolutely fearless in the face of hardship and filled with creativity and determination. Carrying the borrowed tools, I set out with Maria to a place I had noticed on our way here — an abandoned brick kiln.

That kiln had been used by Tsarist Russians when they were building the Middle East Railway, baking the bricks needed for the tracks. It was now utterly dilapidated, but I was determined to fix it up and survive the harsh winter of Da Xing'anling — which still had three long months to go — in that place.

Carrying the saw and axe, we pushed through the thick, falling snow and entered the dense, untouched forest near Yaluhe.

There, we found an endless supply of trees — spruce, larch, and fir — just waiting to be harvested.

Maria and I cut and hauled the timber over the snow. We stacked the larch onto the collapsed kiln and covered it with bundles of straw. Inside the spacious kiln, we built a firepit in the center, and on either side of the fire, we laid out thick straw bedding to make two beds.

While we were doing this, we suddenly heard the crunch of hooves and the sound of a horse-drawn sleigh stopping outside, followed by Mr. Jeon's voice, filled with awe and admiration.

We ran outside to greet him.

Mr. Jeon had brought us three sacks of millet, a sack of salt, two sacks of potatoes, a can of soybean oil, and a full set of cooking utensils, including empty metal cans.

Thanks to Mr. Jeon, who treated us with such warmth, we naturally began seeing each other often. He became an indispensable help in my reclusive life.

One day, I discussed my plans for the future with him.

"I went into the forest the other day to cut wood, and I saw lots of animal tracks in the snow — deer, wild boars, foxes... If I manage to catch one of these animals, do you think anyone would buy them?"

"Of course!" he said. "It's not a matter of demand, it's just that game is hard to catch, and the prices vary. But if you can catch them, there's no problem. You know the dining cars attached to trains? All of those rely on wild game. They take the meat to cities like Harbin or Manzhouli to sell."

What Mr. Jeon told me felt like I had found a treasure map in the middle of a mountain.

I had always been interested in hunting, and I was confident in my marksmanship. Making a living through hunting seemed like an easy task for me.

But all I had was a pistol I kept hidden. You can't hunt wild game with a pistol.

"Hunting is fine, but I'd need ammunition..." I muttered under my breath.

Hearing me, Mr. Jeon quickly offered to lend me the single-shot shotgun he kept at home for security, along with some usable ammunition.

In just three days, I made my first haul: two wild boars and five deer.

I gave part of the catch to Mr. Jeon as thanks for all he had done, and took the rest and headed toward Hala Station. It was just before dawn, the sky barely beginning to brighten.

As I waited at Hala Station for the dining car to arrive, the train finally appeared before my eyes. I rushed aboard, knowing the stop would be brief.

The dining car was Car No. 120, and inside it, I encountered an unexpected miracle.
The owner of Car No. 120 was none other than Osomboff, a famous Russian merchant of the Baekgye (White émigré) community in Harbin.
My relationship with Osomboff dated back several years to when I was staying at Jang Jong-chang's headquarters. We had been close friends then. He knew my situation well and had always kept my secrets safe.

At around 5 a.m., Osomboff opened his eyes, still foggy with sleep, and looked at me with a slightly lifted, drowsy gaze.
Startled, yet amused, he exclaimed,
"Wait, is that really you?"
His reaction was a mix of surprise and disbelief.
Immediately grasping the full context of my situation, he cut straight to the point:
"What can I do to help? Will you be staying here long? Just give me everything you brought with you. Of course, I'll give them back later. I'll do everything I can."

As he was speaking, the train had already begun to move.
"Let's meet again at 9 p.m. three days from now," he called out behind me as I jumped off the already moving train.

Three days later at 9 p.m., Osomboff's Car No. 120 returned to Halla Station without fail. Understanding my difficult circumstances, he gave me 50 won and kindly told me to prepare myself because, by 5 a.m. the next day, he would bring me a rarely-used double-barrel hunting shotgun and a dog.

Sure enough, the next day, I received a high-end German *Bai Elze* shotgun and two well-trained British Setters from Osomboff.

At that point, I had no reason to remain in the brick kiln any longer.
We rented an entire Chinese household and, before winter had passed, I came into possession of a fine horse named “Volga,” famous in the region, as well as a German *Gurup* three-shot hunting rifle.
The hunting dogs were also upgraded to two new breeds: a Gordon Setter and an Irish Setter.

With that, my reputation as a fully equipped and skilled hunter began to spread.
Eventually, it reached even Jiyeongja, a village a bit farther from Halla Station, where five Korean families lived. There, I got to know the community leader Jeong Tong-sa, along with Lee Byeong-do and Kang Jae-hwa.

To them, I seemed like a man shrouded in mystery.
At first, they seemed hesitant, unsure of how to interact with me and reluctant to speak their minds honestly.
But as we became closer through shared hunting experiences, they eventually opened up and started to discuss things more openly with me.

Even the fierce winter that had blown through like a storm was finally beginning to give way to the warmth of spring.
I spent my days in the wild forests of Manchuria, deeply immersed in the hunting life, losing all sense of time.

As the land of North Manchuria began to bloom with the full colors of spring, among the hunters, the talk gradually shifted to preparing for summer and the upcoming *nokyong* (young deer antler) hunting season.

The Korean community in Jiyeongja had a custom of heading into Outer Mongolia during this time each year to hunt for furs.
They weren’t primarily rifle hunters—they mostly used traps or engaged in medicinal hunts.
But entering Outer Mongolia was truly a life-risking endeavor.

Why? Because the hunting grounds in that region were shared with the indigenous Orochon and Solon tribes, who were also active hunters.

Although there weren’t official border patrols along the edge of Outer Mongolia, Mongolian military patrols did occasionally conduct inspections.
Whether it was the Orochon, the Solon, or the Mongolian border guards, once you entered their territory, it became a lawless zone.
Whoever spotted the other first and pulled the trigger faster would live—that’s how dangerous and volatile it was.

According to Jeong Tong-sa, over the past 20 years he had hunted in the region, four or five of his Korean hunting companions had died in such confrontations.

Because of this, when they planned hunting trips, they made sure to form strong, well-prepared teams and took every precaution.

As the dream of nokyong hunting grew nearer, both Jeong Tong-sa and Kang Jae-hwa were eager to recruit me into their respective teams.

They not only confessed that they were impressed by my strong and agile body, determined will, and bold, courageous personality, but also admitted that my exceptional marksmanship and magical skills could enhance the safety and strength of their group.

However, on the other hand, they were also clearly concerned. They felt that I was certainly less familiar with the terrain than they were. Even though they trusted me, there was still doubt—how well could I really adapt to their primitive lifestyle? Could I endure it? They worried that, if we ventured thousands of miles into the wilderness, my presence might cause unexpected trouble or put them in danger.

Still, it was clear that their expectations of me outweighed their concerns. With both sides pulling at me, I seriously contemplated which direction to take and which group to join. Of course, if the two groups were to combine forces, their defensive power would double and each would feel more secure, but that wasn't a simple option.

The main issues were: first, their movements had to be secretive, hidden from outside eyes; and second, there were tricky matters of hierarchy and how the hunting spoils would be distributed. Because of this, forming a single group wasn't feasible.

After much thought, I decided to join the group of three seasoned hunters from Jeongtongsa, led by an older and more prudent man named Gyeong-hyeop. Each of us carried a rifle, a trained horse, and minimal supplies—some rations, binoculars, ammunition, and steel traps for otters. About a week before the summer solstice that year, the four of us set off toward Outer Mongolia.

Starting from Jesimha Valley and crossing through Cheheo and Hongan Range, we traveled deep into the grasslands at the foot of the Great Qing Mountains in Outer Mongolia, aiming to make the basins of Hallaha and Tuergung rivers our main hunting ground.

We were able to follow trails only up to Jesimha. From that point on, we wandered through untamed wilderness—sometimes across high-altitude plateaus thousands of feet above sea level, other times through ancient, untouched forests that hadn't seen sunlight in years. These wild lands stretched on for thousands of li, their boundaries unknowable.

At times, we drove our horses from dawn till dusk, struggling through torrential rivers so fierce they could sweep away even boulders. Even though it was early summer, patches of ice from the winter still clung to the shaded slopes and valleys.

As dusk approached each day, we would search for a peaceful forest of white birch trees and clear water springs to prepare our camp. We stripped bark from withered deadwood to spread over the grass as bedding, and used fallen logs to build a campfire. Lying with our saddles as

pillows and bathed in moonlight, we let our thoughts drift with the passing clouds, listening to the eerie cries of nocturnal beasts that pierced the night.

Summer nights on the high plateau were fleetingly short. We repeated this routine dozens of times. To save food, we filled about 70 percent of our stomachs with meat from animals that came into our traps. After nearly twenty days, we finally reached the Hallaha basin.

On our first hunt there, we caught six or seven deer including females, three bears, and four or five otters. Wanting to avoid unnecessary risk, we decided not to be greedy and were satisfied with this first haul. We tied the precious antlers to the backs of our saddles and began our journey home under the cover of night. To make the return less arduous, we followed the valley trail from Chulruha to Amryuha.

It was when we reached the Chuoha basin that it happened.

Suddenly, before us, a group of over a hundred horses and cattle appeared, herded by nomadic Orochon tribesmen. As mentioned earlier, in these hunting zones of Outer Mongolia, anyone who encounters an unknown person—or even just their shadow—may face a life-or-death standoff, with the outcome determined by who pulls the trigger first. It was precisely to avoid this kind of danger that we had traveled by night. But here we were, face-to-face with members of this fierce tribe. We had to brace ourselves immediately.

Yet, I quickly assessed the situation and realized it might not be so grim. They were Orochon, and they happened to be accompanying their highest authority figure, the Manggaboo (chief). Fortunately, we had a member in our group from Jeongtongsa who personally knew the Manggaboo.

Because they were collectively escorting their spiritual and tribal leader, they couldn't simply fire upon us, so long as we presented ourselves peacefully.

To show respect, we offered the Manggaboo a small gift: some spare ammunition and a piece of raw opium about the size of half a brick, something we had prepared for just such an occasion. The Manggaboo was beyond delighted.

For the Orochon, raw opium was not only their only form of medicine—it was regarded as a treasured possession. Thanks to the Manggaboo's sincere and warm welcome, we received their highest level of hospitality as honored guests.

That night, the Manggaboo hosted us himself.

During our first hunt in the Halahur area, we caught six or seven deer, including a doe, three bears, and four or five otters. We decided not to be greedy, since any more might increase the risk, so we agreed to be satisfied with that for our first harvest. Then we strapped the hard-to-carry antlers behind our saddles and began our journey back at night.

To avoid hardship, we decided to take the return route through the Aplurhe Valley from Chohu.

It was when we reached Zolrahur that it happened.

Suddenly, before our eyes, a group of over a hundred horses and cattle appeared, being herded by nomadic Orochon tribespeople. As I mentioned before, in the hunting grounds of Inner Mongolia, it's a lawless land where survival can depend on who pulls the trigger first, regardless of who the other person is — even just spotting a shadow can be deadly.

That's why we usually traveled at night to avoid danger. But this unexpected confrontation with a group of tribespeople required us to stay extremely alert and cautious.

Still, I quickly realized the situation wasn't necessarily dire. These were Orochon people, and they happened to be traveling with their highest-ranking leader, the Manggabu (#※Gup). On our side, we had someone well-versed in the traditions and culture of the Orochon, someone who knew how to communicate with the Manggabu.

Since they were collectively accompanying their supreme chief, they couldn't just open fire on us as they pleased — as long as we took a friendly stance.

So we offered our respects to the Manggabu, presenting him with a small gift — a lump of raw opium about the size of half a brick, something we had prepared in advance for just such an occasion. The Manggabu was visibly pleased.

Among the Orochon, raw opium wasn't just a luxury, it was essentially their only form of medicine, and they treated it like a precious treasure.

Thanks to the Manggabu's sincere welcome, we were treated as honored guests. That night, he hosted a banquet for us, and we spent the night feasting and drinking in his camp.

As I sliced and ate venison still dripping with blood and sipped their fierce local liquor, I found myself sinking into deep thought amid the rowdy, festive atmosphere.

While drinking and talking with them, I gained new insight into these people — things I had never known before. What thrilled and filled me with unshakable hope was the realization that they were simple and brave people. And with just one word from the Manggabu, he could mobilize some 60,000 Orochon tribespeople.

To someone like me, struggling to advance the independence movement due to a shortage of manpower, that number felt like a dazzling ray of hope.

I began to wonder: Was there no way to involve them in our independence struggle?

The only thing in my mind, as I drank glass after glass of their strong liquor, was how to make this happen. Of course, the Orochon had nothing to do with our country's independence. It wasn't just that they were unrelated — they didn't care in the slightest whether another ethnic group achieved independence or not.

Still, knowing how naive and uneducated they were, I speculated that, if their desires were satisfied and they received compensation that met their needs, they wouldn't hesitate to take on even life-risking tasks.

After careful consideration and analysis, I reached the following conclusion:

If we could provide the Orochon with three things — quality firearms, opium, and fine silk — we could move them, at least to some degree, and temporarily utilize them effectively.

My goal was to organize the Orochon into groups of two to three hundred and launch a surprise raid on commercial centers like Zhengjiatun or Sipingjie, where large numbers of Japanese were concentrated in the northwest part of Feng Tian Province. The aim was to create an international diplomatic incident.

This wild, almost starless night had lit up a spark of ambition inside me.

From that perspective, the Manggabu was the perfect ally.

Before we parted, I asked him if we could meet again around the same time next year, suggesting that we talk more concretely then. The Manggabu gladly agreed and even offered to send a messenger to confirm.

Compared to that, the antlers we had harvested meant nothing. I had struck a deal for a far more valuable bounty.

With renewed hope swelling in my chest, I returned to Maria after about a month and a half.

At the time, Maria was teaching local Korean immigrants and young Chinese children basic primary school-level education.

Using the spoils I received from the Inner Mongolian hunt, I was able to buy a sturdy horse called "Washira," a Czechoslovakian-style repeating rifle, and even a new overcoat for myself and Maria.

What's more, the comrades who had gone hunting with me began spreading stories far and wide, boasting that I was the best marksman they had ever seen and a man of remarkable wit and creativity. Thanks to this, I quickly became a local hero, showered with praise from every direction.

I didn't care how others judged me — I had made up my mind about what I needed to do.

Ever since I met the Manggabu, I began to hold serious ambitions in my heart. From a place of despair, I decided to rebuild, little by little, preparing once more to rise again.

So then, above all else, what we urgently needed was money.
Without money, we couldn't get the cooperation of the Manchurian authorities in anything. First,

we had to earn enough to offer the local landlords gifts—guns, opium, silk. But with the limited means at my disposal, the only option I had for making that kind of money was through hunting. And no matter how much I hunted, it would never bring in the kind of fortune we needed.

Then, unexpectedly, a lucky opportunity came our way. For us at the time, it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance—a rare stroke of fortune.

Originally, Manchuria was well-known for its soybean production, but it was also one of the world's top opium-producing regions, rivaling even India. Especially the valley of Daxinganling, where I lived, was filled with opium fields stretching for hundreds of li. And so, lured by the vast quantities of opium grown there, roving bandits would often come sweeping in from thousands of li away.

On days when these bandits managed to rob entire harvests of hard-earned opium, the investors and growers had no choice but to walk away empty-handed, drenched in blood, with nothing to show for their effort but red, bare hands.

To avoid this fate, the opium growers would pay heavy sums: taxes to the local army officials, and bribes to the bandits to keep their thuggery in check. But after paying off everyone, there was barely anything left in profit.

Because of this, it became common practice for growers to hire someone they could trust to guard the fields when harvest season came. And if that guard successfully defended the field and the harvest went without a hitch, the owner often paid him a reward worth a fraction of the entire crop’s value—a massive sum.

But even then, if you really thought about it, that reward wasn’t generous. Guarding an opium field was a life-or-death gamble. For about three weeks, the guard had to stay up all night and only nap lightly during the day, constantly on alert. The hardship was beyond description.

And that wasn’t even the worst of it. If you were unlucky and the bandits showed up, you had to fight them with rifles and blades. No one would take that job without absolute confidence in themselves.
Still, after thinking it over, I decided to take that job. I told Maria of my decision and asked for her agreement. She knew as well as I did that we had no other choice. There was no point resisting.

“I agree with you,” Maria said. “But I have one condition.”
“And what’s that?”
“I’m coming with you.”

I didn’t want to bring Maria to such a dangerous place. But I couldn’t talk her out of it either, and in truth, I was relieved to have her with me. Her presence would be a great help.

I started to fantasize, wildly excited, imagining the riches I’d earn from guarding the field. In my mind’s eye, I saw myself leading hundreds of villagers, storming into a Japanese-controlled town

like a thunderbolt. I'd wipe out the Japanese merchant class with brutal efficiency, and then turn my horse around without a word.

The result of that one act would be enough to openly sour relations between China and Japan, pushing the two countries into war. And when war spread across the continent, it might transform into a war of liberation for all the oppressed peoples of Asia. That, in turn, would lead us to independence, freeing us from Japan's grasp through armed resistance.

My imagination spiraled out endlessly, like a flame tossed into a deep cave. I felt my whole body tingle with the thrill of it.

Yes, I would endure and overcome whatever hardship came my way.

I immediately began writing two letters. To pull off what I had in mind, I first needed trusted assistants. One was Nam Gyeong-u, a remaining comrade from the death squad. The other was Min Hae-yang, an old friend from our days together in Yeonggotap. I called on both of them to come quickly.

Maria, my wife, was born and raised in Siberia, and from girlhood, she had plenty of experience cultivating and harvesting opium. It was now harvest season, and thanks to my reputation as an excellent marksman in the area, I was able to quickly secure the job we needed.

Our destination was a large opium field in the Amnok Valley, about 100 li from where we were. The field, owned by a Chinese landowner, stretched for several days' journey—massive.

Maria would oversee the harvesting. I would guard the field alone.

I carried with me the Czech rifle I had taken from my last hunt, along with 300 rounds of ammunition and a pair of binoculars. Maria and I rode separately, she on the mare Washika, and I on the stallion Wolga, galloping into the sunlit valley of Amnok.

While riding, Maria and I solemnly reaffirmed our vows. Whatever dangers or hardships awaited us, we would endure them together for the sake of our greater cause.

"Maria, let's grit our teeth and just push through these next three weeks. If this goes well, we can restart the shattered Manchurian armed resistance."

"I know. Don't worry about me. I'm ready."

Maria had always been the one who gave me strength—not when things were hopeful or safe or happy, but when they were desperate, dangerous, and grim. That's when her courage and strength seemed boundless.

When we arrived at the field, I first studied the terrain carefully. I picked out key positions—between the rocks of a narrow mountain pass that led to the field, and a hollow beneath a ridge on the opposite side. Those would be my lookout points.

With everything planned out, our work began.

During the day, I patrolled these lookout spots in secret, moving silently and watching for any threats. I had to stay so alert it felt like every nerve in my body had become eyes and ears. It was exhausting.

At night, I took shelter between the rocks at the foot of the mountain, staying up all night in the cold.

Maria, for her part, worked from dawn till late evening alongside the harvesters, cooking rice in her military mess kit during breaks and bringing it to our agreed drop spot.

No one knew the location of my base. Not even Maria. I would find the food she left, eat, and quietly return the empty container to the same place.

The workers only knew I was somewhere nearby. They didn't know where. They didn't even know if one person or ten people were guarding the field.

It was a grueling three weeks.
But fate was on our side.

No bandits came.
No heavy rain ruined the harvest.

The reason we chose to depart at 3 p.m. for a journey of about 50 kilometers was as follows.

There were far too many people targeting the opium. Especially during harvest season, it was common for small groups of mounted bandits to lie in ambush at key road points. They would suddenly appear, or a soldier or policeman would guard a road for a while, then break off and rob lone travelers of their belongings. These things happened occasionally.

This particular danger zone was about 8 kilometers out from Abyul Station, so we left later in the day, hoping to pass through under cover of darkness.

But even with full precautions, we couldn't afford to let our guard down.

To prepare for the worst, we didn't stash the child-pillow-sized lump of opium—received as payment for labor—in the saddlebags attached to the horse. Instead, we wrapped the pieces in separate green cloths and carried them by hand. If someone tried to rob us, our plan was to quickly toss them into the grass nearby.

We had worked hard to earn that opium, and we knew where it was going. How could we let ourselves be robbed of it without a fight? No matter what, we couldn't lose it.

Perhaps because we were so thoroughly prepared, we were once again lucky. Even though we passed the very place we had feared, not a single robber appeared. As dusk deepened and the

faint half-moon began to rise, we passed through the thick forest lining the banks of the dark blue Yalu River and finally reached the riverside.

Just across the river, after a short ride, we would be home at last. No one was waiting for us, but still, home was the only place where we could lay our weary bodies to rest. Our hearts were eager to return.

Back home, we could wash off all the dust and grime from the journey, stretch our legs, and rest peacefully. And maybe—just maybe—the man we had sent a letter to, Min Doodong-ji, would be there waiting for us.

"Maria, let's go quickly," I said, leading Maria forward to start crossing the river.

It wasn't the same spot we used to cross when going to Abyul Valley, but I had crossed here once about six months ago on horseback. I knew the water would only reach up to the horse's belly, so I didn't think twice and let Maria go ahead into the water.

The distance between Maria and me was about 5 or 6 meters. Bathed in the faint light of the half-moon, I watched her horse slowly enter the deeper part of the river. I followed behind, nudging my horse forward. Even in the dim light, I could clearly see the green cloth bundle in Maria's hand.

And then, it happened.

In the blink of an eye, the horse Maria was riding sank into the water, and she was swept away by the strong current. In that instant, her head disappeared below the surface.

It was truly a split second.

Instinctively, I threw the green bundle in my hand with all my might toward the riverbank behind me, and, like a madman, rolled off the horse's back and plunged into the water.

The current was strong and cold. Even my sturdy body was nearly overwhelmed. Frantically, I swam downstream in the freezing current, desperately searching for Maria.

I wasn't thinking straight. If I lost Maria here, then I too had no reason to go on.

Driven only by the thought of saving her, I chased a shadow that looked like her through the moonlight. At first, I grabbed a rock, mistaking it for her, and mistook river weeds for her hair. But finally, I managed to grab hold of her disheveled hair as it surged to the surface.

It was an incredibly close call. A little further, and she would have been pulled into a deadly whirlpool.

That terrifying whirlpool, which never let anything living escape, was just a few feet in front of me.

But Maria was already unconscious.

I carried her as far as I could, brought her ashore, slung her limp body over my shoulder, and laid her down on the riverbank. I propped her back against the trunk of a fallen tree and began lifting her arms to try and revive her.

And then, in the faint moonlight, I saw it—her hand still clutching the green cloth bundle.

A wave of indescribable emotion overcame me again.

Maria's will—not to let go of that green bundle even in death.

What could it have meant to her?

I performed artificial respiration with all the sincerity I could muster, repeating the same simple motion hundreds of times. In my mind, there was only one thing: I had to save Maria. And I kept thinking about that green cloth she never let go of.

Maybe it was some kind of death grip, a reflex to grab anything like a lifeline when drowning. But most people, when they fall into water, let go of whatever they were holding from the shock.

People are selfish like that.

During the Korean War, when families crossed the Han River, there were countless stories of parents letting go of their children's hands to save themselves.

We've seen too many examples of people who, even in death, valued their own lives more than their own children's.

And whenever I think of that, I'm reminded again of Maria—unconscious in the river, yet never letting go of that green bundle. What was driving her?

In any case, it took about an hour and a half for Maria to finally regain consciousness.

When she did, I asked,

"You were on the verge of death, so why did you hold on so tightly to that bundle? What could be more important than your life?"

And she simply replied,

"To buy a gun."

Just like that, as if it were nothing.

From the other side of the river, her horse and mine stared blankly at their drenched, exhausted riders.

That money—so carefully prepared—ended up being unnecessary. Even the people I had summoned, Nankyung-woo and Min Haeyang, came without delay.

But by the following year, I no longer needed to meet with Mangabu.

There was no more need for small, old-fashioned guerrilla raids with hundreds of poorly armed fighters attacking posts like Jungga-noon or Supunggah.

Things were moving rapidly. In the chaos of Manchuria, new leaders rose up for the national cause—General So Byeong-mun, General Ma Jeomsan. They needed me and sent word across the land, calling me.

Perhaps the gods of fate had not abandoned me after all.

Yevgeny Moguchi's Love

Every year, around mid-September, I go bird hunting for shorebirds near Ju'an by Incheon or to the west of Suwon, in the Sari region. These birds are a type of migratory bird that often settle in coastal wetlands or in rice paddies that were flooded during the monsoon. The two spots I frequent see shorebirds land reliably every spring and autumn, unlike other areas where the birds are hit-or-miss.

Of course, the thrill of shooting those small birds is part of the fun, but more than that, the wide open skies and fresh air always lift the heavy weight from my chest.

This year, I chose to go to Sari instead of Ju'an. As the jeep carrying us passed through Gunpo and curved through Banwol-myeon on the way to Sari, I saw clusters of delicate cosmos flowers swaying in the autumn breeze on both sides of the remote mountain road—who planted them and when, I couldn't say. The sight of those cosmos flowers unexpectedly moved me. Of all the countless flowers, it's the cosmos that stirs my heart, maybe because every time I see them, they bring back a certain memory.

Just the other day, I came across cosmos by the roadside again. And once more, I was reminded of something—something long ago, something I experienced in the remote valley of Daheung Anryeong. An unforgettable, heart-wrenching memory from the past returned to me.

It was when I had just settled in Hallasu with my wife Maria and had begun to get to know the locals. That's when I met a man who piqued my interest more than anyone else.

He was one of only a handful of white Russians in the area. He was a strong and sturdy man in his thirties, but what drew my attention wasn't just his impressive build.

There was a noble dignity in his face, overflowing with masculine courage, that made him seem untouchable. His appearance alone suggested a man of action.

He wore a mix of clothes: a peasant's labor jacket on top and Russian cavalry officer's riding breeches on the bottom, paired with repurposed boots whose soles were modified in the Mongolian or Orochon style. It was an odd combination that defied convention, yet it somehow suited him so well that it was almost uncanny. If anyone else had worn such a mismatched outfit, they would've looked absolutely ridiculous. But on him, the look only amplified his rugged masculinity—it was hard to believe how natural it seemed.

His name was **Yevgeny Moguchi**.

One day, I was introduced to him through an acquaintance. Even up close, he remained silent, showing no trace of joy, anger, sorrow, or pleasure—just as I had imagined from watching him from a distance.

He behaved the same with everyone, not just me. If your eyes met, he'd acknowledge you with a simple greeting, but that was it. He never engaged in deeper conversation with anyone.

I've met my share of quiet people in this world, but I've rarely seen someone as silent or seemingly detached from worldly matters as Moguchi. Still, I gradually began to hear stories about him.

Of course, they weren't from him—he never spoke about himself—but wherever they came from, the stories felt strangely credible.

He was once a subordinate of General Ungern-Sternberg, the staunch royalist who remained loyal to Tsarist Russia. Moguchi himself had been a cavalry captain and the son-in-law of a count who commanded a regiment of Russian cavalry.

When the Russian Revolution broke out, Moguchi led his cavalry company in fierce resistance against the Red Army, fighting to the bitter end. But like many, his unit suffered defeat after defeat. Eventually, his entire company was wiped out—only Moguchi miraculously survived.

He escaped the battlefield and made his way to his wife, who had been staying a hundred li away. With his wife Nina, the count's daughter, he fled in the dead of night, slipping across the border into Outer Mongolia, then into the deep mountains of Daheung Anryeong.

They wandered into the wilderness, riding two horses deep into the rugged mountains. When they finally came to a stop, they found themselves in Hallasu. It was the same for me—I had

come from the east, he from the west, and we both ended up in this same place. Our reasons and timing were different, of course, but we had both retreated from the world. Perhaps that's why I felt an even deeper pull toward him.

Even though the rumors about Moguchi had spread across the small Hallasu station area, he showed no sign of acknowledging or denying them. He just continued on in silent indifference.

His home was about 600 meters from the station, perched on a hillside. He lived in a modest three-room house. Everyone in Hallasu knew where he lived, but no one had ever been inside. No one could say how he lived or what he owned. Since he'd arrived shortly before me, I had no idea how he acquired the house—whether he built it himself or moved into an empty one. I didn't have the time or energy to look into it, either.

He was so reclusive that no one dared to knock on his door, and there were no neighbors nearby to observe his life. But even at a distance, he gave off the impression of a man living a simple, diligent life.

Back in Imperial Russia, officers were typically from the noble class, a tradition going back to the 18th century. They usually lived lives of lavish luxury, and because they'd been raised in such comfort, most of them weren't equipped to endure the hardship and discipline of military life. It was a society where true grit was rarely found among the elite.

Moguchi had come from that same background, but he showed no signs of it. His life now was one of frugality and hard work.

At some point, more stories about him trickled in. One was that he had sold the horse his wife had ridden to Hallasu at the market in Bicheot, and used the money to buy hunting gear.

Apparently, he was a superb marksman, known for his calm and steady nature, and he possessed physical strength that people described as almost superhuman.

There was no doubt that he lived off hunting. But where he hunted, how often, and for how long —no one knew. No one had ever seen him out in the field. He never hunted with anyone else.

But Moguchi wasn't the only enigma.

His wife, known by the name **Nina**, was no less shrouded in mystery. Whenever her husband went off hunting, she would lock the door behind him and—without fail—never stepped outside...

I could never figure them out.

The seasons changed, and even the world around us slowly shifted with time,
but the one thing that seemed utterly unchanging was the love between Mr. and Mrs. Moguchi.
It was in that unwavering devotion that, at some point, unsettling rumors began to surface.

The whispers started with a Chinese man who lived about 400 meters away from the Moguchis' home. Slowly, word spread through the village.
At first, it sounded like nonsense — the kind of gossip that would die off as quickly as it started.

According to the Chinese man, who could understand Russian, the couple occasionally argued late at night.
And whenever Moguchi came back from being out — usually hunting — there were always fights.
The villagers were told they could hear Moguchi's furious, snarling voice, but Nina's response was completely different.
Her voice always sounded calm and maternal, like a devoted mother trying to reason with a child.

To those of us who had only ever seen their gentle, affectionate demeanor from afar,
it was unthinkable. These two — the very image of happiness, the couple everyone secretly envied —
arguing so loudly in their secluded little mountain home that even neighbors could hear? It just didn't make sense.

What could they possibly have to fight about?
They didn't talk to anyone else. The only time Moguchi ever left the house was to hunt.
And Nina, so pure and graceful, looked like an angel — modest, beautiful, and innocent.
What in the world could drive Moguchi to such rage?

Speculation ran wild. People guessed and theorized in every direction.
But no one could crack the mystery of the Moguchi couple.

Then one day, something finally happened.
It was my second autumn in Hallasu.
1929.

The cosmos flowers were blooming — not pink or crimson, but pure white —
lining the path that led from Hallasu Station about 1,500 meters to the edge of the nameless Yalluhe Mountain bend.
That path became the backdrop to the couple's twilight strolls, which they took almost every day.

Seeing them walk, leaning gently on each other's shoulders, who could ever imagine
that these were the same people rumored to have fierce, secret fights in the dead of night?

As autumn deepened, the air turned crisp.
Then one morning, quiet Hallasu erupted into chaos like someone had kicked a beehive.

Something had happened at the Moguchi house.
But what exactly? Nobody knew.
There was only one thing certain: something terrible had taken place.

The villagers rushed toward the Moguchi home, climbing the steep path.
Only four or five days earlier, we had all seen them on one of their usual sunset walks.
And then they vanished.

We assumed Moguchi had gone off hunting again. That would explain it.
But if that were the case, then what happened to Nina during those four or five days?

Panting, everyone climbed toward the house, but no one could go past the edge of the property.

Moguchi stood out front, holding a loaded rifle, shouting that he would shoot anyone who came near.

His eyes were bloodshot with rage and madness,
a tangled mess of hatred, fury, determination, and despair.
His tightly shut mouth twitched with spasms,
and his face was no longer human — it was the face of a wild beast, feral and broken.

Knowing how dangerous and unstable Moguchi could be, the villagers had no choice but to back away down the slope.
Among them were four or five railroad police officers, but even they were helpless.
The sun set, and nothing could be done.

That night in Hallasu — already a remote village at the edge of the world — grew heavy with a nameless dread.

The next morning, we gathered again at the Moguchi home.
No one called for it — we were simply drawn there.
This time, it was a different kind of fear that gripped us.

The house was utterly silent, like death itself had moved in.
There was no sign of life. Even the stables were empty — not a trace of the horse.

We stepped closer. One step, then two.
We opened the front door.

It wasn't locked. It swung open without resistance.
We stepped inside.

No one was there.

And for the first time in all those years, we could finally glimpse the traces of their secret lives.

There wasn't much, but it was all strikingly neat — the bed covers, tablecloths,
the samovar used for brewing tea — everything was immaculate.
Even the few pieces of furniture were clearly expensive and carefully chosen.

Then we saw something chilling at the head of the bed where Nina must have slept.
An empty bottle of strychnine — one of the deadliest poisons used to kill wild animals.

We stared at it in horror, exchanging uneasy glances.

“Nina is dead.”

We all silently confirmed what we didn’t dare say out loud.

“Beautiful Nina... What reason could she possibly have had to die?”

No one had an answer.
We just stood there, frozen like wooden totem poles.

Then the door burst open. A young Chinese boy came running in, asking for Mr. Baek Ho-jang.

When Mr. Yoo stepped forward, the boy handed him a letter.

It was from Nina — a long letter addressed to Mr. Yoo. Her final message.

She had entrusted it to him not as a friend, but as a community leader — someone she hoped would serve as an official witness.

Mr. Yoo opened the letter and read it aloud. And through her words, we finally understood why she chose death.

“Under this sky, on this earth, it felt as though only we two existed.
We loved each other that deeply.
To us, our marriage was the entire world.
Even now, as I write this with death approaching,
I am filled with a happiness that could only come from heaven.

You may wonder — how could a woman this loved, this happy, choose to die?
But it is precisely because of my love for him that I must.

As long as I remain alive, his torment will only grow.
So what value does my life have if it causes him such pain?
He loves me that much.

He loved me so deeply that his love turned to doubt,
and from doubt to jealousy.

Isn’t it proof of how profound his love was,
that it eventually consumed him like this?

No matter how I tried to explain or deny it,
it didn’t ease his suffering.

In the end, my very existence became the cause of his torment."

We stood there, stunned — hearts crushed by a love so pure it had turned destructive.

“But at last, I was abandoned by the goddess of fate.”
It happened the day he went off on his final hunting trip.
It was bitterly cold, and I tried to light a fire, but the logs we had at home were too big to catch.
As I looked around wondering what to do, I noticed, for some reason, that he had left the door unlocked when he left.
That’s when I, for the first time in my life, stepped foot into a Chinese person’s house—
I had gone to borrow an axe.
At that exact moment, he suddenly thought about the fact that he had forgotten to lock the door and turned back toward the house.

What excuse could I possibly offer him?
Maybe I didn’t need to say anything at all.
I knew that no words or power could possibly comfort the madness and agony he felt.

When I die, please bury me at the edge of the hill, where the cosmos flowers bloom—
the place where I always used to spend time with him.
After I’m gone, he’ll be left alone and lonely, but perhaps that pain will finally set him free.
To those who remain, please offer comfort to the one I loved.
This is my final wish.”

When Mr. Yo finished reading Nina’s letter, it left all of us in silent tears.
Some of the women broke into full sobs.

We drifted out of the house.
Without anyone saying a word, our gazes turned toward the bend in the hill behind Yalu.
From afar, we could see Mogoji digging the earth.
He must have known Nina’s wish without ever having heard it.

“Let’s help Mogoji,”
Mr. Yo suggested.
We began walking toward the hill to gently lay Nina to rest.

But we were never given the chance to carry out our good intentions.
As we approached, Mogoji once again raised his rifle and threatened us.

“Come any closer and I won’t let you live!”
That kind of murderous resolve flared from his bloodshot eyes like a curse.

To let him say his final farewell to Nina without regret, we silently descended the mountainside.

The next day, we learned that everything—Nina's clothes, Mogoji's clothes, and every piece of furniture—had been moved from their home to the hill.
From a distance, we could still see Mogoji digging.

How long had he worked on building Nina's grave?
The people of Hallasoo watched from the hill every day, quietly moved, as he toiled alone without rest.

Over time, talk about Mogoji and Nina no longer became much of a topic.
As the couple slowly faded from the memories of Hallasoo's people,
Mogoji himself vanished from the hillside.

In his place stood a grand mound—the tomb of Nina.

The people of Hallasoo soon began to gather again at the leaf-strewn hill.
We were all astonished to see her grave.

Where had he found such materials?
Her resting place, built from massive natural stones, resembled the tomb of a queen.
It was hard to believe it had been built entirely by Mogoji's hands alone.

Inside the grave, all of the furniture and clothing from their happy times together had been buried alongside Nina.

At the front of the tomb stood a gravestone carved from a single log.
Etched in bold strokes with a hunting knife, the epitaph read:

"What strength of love is this? Even death pales before it."

Since then, no one has ever claimed to have seen Mogoji again.
But from some point on, the nameless bend in the hill where Nina's tomb lay came to be known simply as **"Mogoji Hill."**

A Story About a Father and Son

I, too, often tell others that I am someone who knows and controls myself. But after making such claims, I sometimes pause and realize just how ridiculous that lie was. Truly knowing oneself is harder than understanding others. Even when I try to assess myself, I find that my emotions swing with joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, and that I often express emotions differently than I actually feel. Sometimes, I even take stances completely contrary to my thoughts.

I doubt there are many people who harbor such deep contradictions in their personality as I do. I am someone so complex, so inconsistent, that it's difficult to sum me up in a single word. Now that I'm more than two years past the age of seventy, I can say without doubt that my life has been shaped significantly by my personality. Whether in human relationships, social dealings, or

even while serving in public office, I cannot deny how much my unique character has influenced me.

That leads me to wonder how deeply my family was affected by my temperament and how drastically it may have changed them. Like many others, I once immersed myself in books discussing humanity—East and West, ancient and modern. But I still firmly believe that while people are indeed shaped by their environment, the influence of their inborn nature is ultimately small and limited.

Because of that belief, I've always thought that no amount of family upbringing, schooling, or social education can completely remake a person. Since the time I started a family in China, I've received countless evaluations and frank advice from those close to me regarding how I behaved at home.

Even great elders I deeply respected—like Oh Seok Kim Hak-so, who died serving in Manchuria, or Lee Si-young, our first vice president—repeatedly admonished and taught me. Their feedback always centered around my stubbornness, coldness, and lack of concern.

Whenever I heard those things, I was so stunned I couldn't even come up with an excuse. I just bitterly accepted it.
Honestly, though, I wonder if there's another man in the world who loves, trusts, and quietly fears his wife as deeply as I do.

Some might say I'm just making excuses, but the truth is, I don't express affection by buying gifts after trips or by always accompanying my wife to events. I don't consult her about every little thing either.

Yet, no one respects his wife more than I do, trusting her completely. So when people tell me I lack concern or act cold, I find it hard to accept those criticisms in good faith.

That's not to say I think of my wife as flawless.
I do acknowledge that from others' perspectives, my behavior might seem that way. But despite hearing these things, I never thought about changing how I act toward her. Nor could I.

Although I deeply respect and love my wife, I must admit that the way I've expressed my emotions has often remained within the boundaries of stubbornness, coldness, and indifference.

When I reflect on that now, I can't help but feel some guilt toward her.
And the same is true for our only son—the one and only child we had in our long marriage. I was forty years old when he was born, the fifth generation only-son of our family line.

He is, in many ways, more precious to me than life itself. Yet, I can count on one hand the number of times I've held him in my arms—and those were only in rare, life-threatening moments. Other than that, I've never embraced him.

Now, he's a 32-year-old man, married with a child of his own. He's pursuing dual graduate degrees in mechanical engineering and geology at the University of Arizona in the United States.

In the summer of 1967, after eight years apart, my wife and I finally met our son, who had returned with his wife and our grandson. Even during the short ten days he stayed in Korea, the emotional distance between us felt unchanged.

Still, perhaps my heart has softened over the years, because my feelings toward my grandson were quite different from those I had toward my son. I even held my grandson in my arms and took pictures with him—something I never did with my son. Maybe that's the difference between a father's love and a grandfather's affection.

Our son, Bok-hong, was born in Heochang, Henan Province, China, when I had just turned forty. He was born during the height of the eight-year war in China and was our only child.

At the time, I was serving as the chief of staff under General Jo Bok-rim in the Chinese military. I had just returned from leading a campaign north of the Yellow River when our son was born, and from then on, he grew up amid the chaos of bombings and gunfire.

Even then, he was still the only son of our five-generation family line. After I returned to Korea, I found out my father had had more children, so perhaps that title no longer applied. Still, he remained the only child born to my wife and me.

A firstborn under those circumstances usually becomes the object of overwhelming parental affection. But as I mentioned earlier, in the eyes of others, my treatment of him likely appeared cold and indifferent, confined to those familiar patterns.

When Maria became pregnant, three months passed without any signs of labor.

She had previously miscarried five years earlier and had since felt deep guilt about our childlessness, praying fervently to the gods as if it were her fault. When she became pregnant again just before turning forty, she saw it as a miracle.

Maria devoted all her heart to the baby in her womb. She worked tirelessly without concern for hardship but then began caring for herself as delicately as an empress.

Yet even after the expected delivery date had passed, there were no signs of birth. Maria grew increasingly anxious, and in my concern, I took her to a famous doctor in our region—Director Uchida at Jenam Hospital.

After an examination, including an X-ray, Dr. Uchida diagnosed her with ovarian cysts.

To think that what we believed was pregnancy was actually ovarian cysts—what, then, was inside that belly the size of Mount Namsan?

Dr. Uchida urged immediate surgery, warning that only through an operation could Maria's life be saved.

If what was inside her belly wasn't a fetus, then wasn't my only remaining duty to immediately operate and save Maria's life?
I agreed to the surgery. Even if we couldn't have children, Maria was someone I absolutely needed.

But Maria herself refused with resolute determination.
She said she would rather die than undergo the surgery, even if it meant never having children.

When Maria first experienced pregnancy symptoms, she thought she had fallen ill and once visited a female practitioner named Heo, who diagnosed her through traditional pulse reading. The practitioner had confidently declared, "You're three months pregnant, and it's definitely a boy."

I was dumbfounded.
How could some quack possibly claim it was a boy or girl when it didn't even show up on X-rays? And how could she risk her life on such a claim?

Yet Maria's decision was firm.
She believed she had a duty to give birth to the child, no matter what.

I failed to convince her. Leaving behind a woman whose belly grew larger by the day, who could barely move, I had no choice but to depart for the front lines. I entrusted her to four Chinese soldiers stationed at the official residence and went off.

And so, one day when I wasn't there, Maria finally went into labor and gave birth—19 months after conception.

She immediately passed out.
Startled, the soldiers summoned an old woman from the neighboring house. When she arrived, she saw the newborn lying in a pool of blood, sucking on its own toes.

The terrified old woman later confessed, through a messenger, that she had panicked, cut the umbilical cord any which way, and fled.

Thus, I first laid eyes on my son months after his birth.

After Nanjing fell to Japan, the Chinese Nationalist Government relocated to Wuchang.
When our Provisional Government settled in Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province, with the cooperation of the Nationalists, I called for my wife and child to join me.

Following my son's birth, I was reassigned as a battalion commander in the Central Training Corps. Although this moved me away from the front lines, in modern, multidimensional warfare, there really was no rear.

Then, a year before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor—in 1940—our Provisional Government established the Korean Liberation Army in Chongqing.
Only then could I finally reclaim my real name and Korean nationality, which I had concealed while serving in the Chinese military.

At that time, founding the Korean Liberation Army (KLA) was more significant for securing legal recognition for our exiled government in China than for demonstrating military power.
Still, since we called it an "army," we had to demonstrate at least minimal military capability.

However, manpower quickly became a major challenge.
The KLA's most urgent task was to recruit Korean youth and train them under the banner of national independence.

Initially, I served as Chief of Staff and later became the commander of the 2nd Detachment, based in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province.
We began organizing and training our troops there.

The KLA's funding came through the Military Commission of the Chinese government.
Eventually, we carried out joint operations with Chinese forces, but at this early stage, we were still under strict scrutiny.
We needed the Commission's approval for every expenditure.

My personal life was already financially strained, and after switching from a paid post in the Chinese army to unpaid duties in the KLA, things only got worse.
I could barely support my family without Maria's help.

At the time, Maria found a job through an acquaintance as a Russian language instructor at the Northwest Branch of the Central Chinese Military Academy.
She taught there twice a week, walking 40 li (about 16 km) one way.
On lucky days, she could hitch a ride back in a military vehicle, but most days, she had to walk the full 80 li round trip.

The KLA's members included former independence fighters from Manchuria, the children of officials in the Provisional Government, Koreans working individually in the Chinese military, and even Korean civilians forcibly conscripted by Chinese guerrillas.
Men were drafted into military training, and naturally, their families became part of the KLA's extended network.

Some of the wives and daughters of these soldiers even volunteered to serve as female troops in the independence struggle.
Even if their military training was separate, the KLA still had to support their households.

Providing housing for soldiers with families became an extra, heavy burden.
Worse yet, the number of children kept growing.

With shoddy facilities, inadequate resources, and failing logistics, we struggled daily just to maintain minimum health—let alone proper child development.

In an attempt to alleviate this hardship, I made repeated, desperate appeals to the Chinese military units I had once served under.
But how could we expect aid to sustain a ballooning population when resources were already stretched thin?

The number of sick rose, and deaths followed.
With my limited power, I couldn't stop the hunger and death spreading through the 2nd Detachment of the KLA.
Many nights, I secretly soaked my pillow with tears and clenched my teeth in helpless rage.

Then came an early winter day, when frost covered the ground like white powder.
My four-year-old son, Bok-heung, caught the flu—just like everyone else.
It quickly turned into pneumonia.

Maria, who had poured her entire being into raising our son, naturally intended to use her meager teaching income to pay for his treatment.
Of course she would rush to the hospital with our son, using the very money that sustained us.

But I stopped her.
I sat her down and argued with her all night.
I did everything I could to prevent her from taking Bok-heung to the hospital.

I knew how precious a child was.
But I couldn't, in good conscience—as someone with duties, comrades, and soldiers under my command—let my wife spend that money.

We didn't have any medical funds.
At the time, the war situation for China was so dire that even the Chinese army itself had almost no medical facilities.

Even when half the sick died unjustly, they couldn't utter a single complaint.
And we were foreigners in their land...

When members of the Liberation Army fell seriously ill, we had no choice but to rely on local doctors of nature.

The day before, a five-year-old son of one of our comrades who had come over from the enemy's rear died. For a whole month, the boy had been lying sick, and we had done nothing—nothing at all—to treat him. But perhaps because he had been born after eighteen years of childlessness, Maria's maternal love was unlike anything else in the world. It had a fierce, unwavering quality. She reacted to my decision almost like a madwoman. She insisted she would pay for Bokheung's treatment herself—not with army funds, but with the money she earned through grueling physical labor. She would not yield, not one step.

That night, Maria and I fought bitterly, with our feverish, dying son lying between us. All night long, we argued. Then, at daybreak, when the morning bugle sounded for roll call, Maria finally gave in, drained and defeated. I told myself that if anything were to happen to our son, the responsibility would fall entirely on me. My decision had won out, but I had never felt more grim in victory.

Strangely, starting that evening, Bokheung began to improve. The next day, he got a little better. I believed his body was fighting the illness naturally, and I felt immensely relieved.

Three nights later, our shelter was half-destroyed by violence. The cold winds of the continent, sweeping in through the shattered burlap walls, rushed in mercilessly. The boy, who had been lying on a shared bed, suddenly worsened. His breathing became loud and erratic. As Maria held his burning body in her arms, she confessed, sobbing like someone out of her mind: she had broken her promise to me. Without telling me, she had secretly taken the boy to a local Chinese clinic, spending all the money she had—37 won. They needed to continue the treatment for at least another week, but now they had nothing left. She had skipped just one day, and he had deteriorated this badly. Her face was wet with tears as she pleaded with me.

In that moment, I was overwhelmed—not because I was angry, but because I was devastated. Even though I hadn't intended it, I felt like I was no better than those comrades whose children had died without so much as a shot at treatment. The phrase "life is precious" flashed through my mind. I remembered the times I had run across the line of fire in the past. I now connected that past with the present—my child before me, burning with fever and barely able to breathe, desperately crying for cold water.

Suddenly, I snapped and shouted,

"You and your son are nothing but a damn burden to this country!"

Maria had no more money in her pocket. She couldn't even take him back to the clinic if she wanted to. I realized there was no point in blaming her now.

But from that night on, despite the physically exhausting days, I stayed up with Maria for three straight nights.

On the night of the fourth day, while I was in the office writing an important report, I was suddenly overcome with a strange impulse. I rushed back home.

My son had lost consciousness. His rib cage moved in and out like the fluttering wings of a moth pressed against a wall.

When a pneumonia patient's ribs move like that, it means death is near.

Still, I told myself I had to stay calm. I looked at Maria, who was out of her mind with fear, and said gently,

"Look, he’s sleeping deeply. He must be feeling much better."

But I couldn’t bring myself to return to the office.

I sat by his bed, lighting cigarette after cigarette, not even sure what I was thinking, lost in a deep daze. Outside, the infamous Mongolian winds roared like a train, and the candle inside flickered wildly. Then, out of nowhere, the child—who normally could only speak Chinese—called out:

“Father!”

Instinctively, I glanced at the clock. It was two in the morning. A chilling sense of doom crept over me. I felt as though this was the hour my only son would leave this world.

I answered him and slowly walked over to his bedside. His eyes were wide open, and he looked straight at me. He motioned for me to lean in so he could hug me.

“You’re feeling better, huh?” I said as I bent down.

He wrapped his ice-cold hands around my neck. His arms felt weak and damp. After a few seconds, he let go and said clearly, in full sentences:

“Dad, I’m not going to die. When Woni died, he didn’t even get any medicine, but I got two injections. Since I got injections, I’m not going to die. I saw how sad Woni’s dad was when Woni died, so I know I can’t die. Go sleep, Dad. You’re not sleeping because of me, right?”

It was the first time I’d ever heard my son speak so clearly, with such composure.

"Yes, you’re right. You’re absolutely right."

As I turned to return to my bed, my legs felt like they weighed a thousand pounds.

He fell unconscious again.

Maria began weeping softly, convinced it was the end.

I cursed in Russian, a pitiful attempt to hide my growing fear.

Just then, in the haze of confusion and dreams, the cold air of dawn crept through the cracks in the wall and brought me back to my senses.

And I heard—unexpectedly—the sound of hooves.

Our unexpected visitor at dawn was none other than Lee Jeong-mo, the head of the Chinese security bureau. He said he was on his way to the countryside on a sudden trip, but had heard my son had been suffering from pneumonia for days and came to see us.

In the north part of this village, there was a Chinese herbal clinic called Huichuntang, run by a renowned practitioner named Kwak Maja, known as an authority on childhood pneumonia. Lee said his own son had recovered after taking three doses of Kwak's medicine two years ago.

Hearing that, I was overwhelmed by a strange sense of grace. It felt like fate hadn't abandoned me after all. Mr. Lee insisted on covering all the costs and told me to take the boy to Kwak Maja immediately.

Kwak Maja was a man of true character. Unlike others who inspired anxiety and fear, he spoke calmly and asked why we hadn't come to him sooner.

He prepared medicine and instructed us to give the child three doses a day.

I've never seen such miraculous results from any medicine, no matter how effective it claimed to be.

From that day forward, my son passed through the valley of death and began recovering.

To anyone, the idea of a father arguing with his wife all night, demanding not to treat their dying child, would seem utterly insane. But I did it because I had my reasons—reasons that made sense to me then as a father.

My son is now thirty, with a wife and family of his own. While I never once raised my voice at him, I also failed to show him any meaningful expression of love.

Still, I tell myself that I was a role model—someone who showed him what it meant to live with dignity as a true human being.

Yet, whenever I walk beneath the moonlight, I feel a deep sense of shame toward the shadow that follows me.

In a letter from my son in America, he once wrote:

"Now that I'm older, I finally understand the difference between a mother's love and a father's faith."

That he could write something like that—my son...

Tomsk, Month 8

The national resistance on the Amur River eventually retreated from Nösan to Jialantun, and from Jialantun to Xing’an in a gradual, step-by-step withdrawal operation. Among the many volunteer units that had gathered from the provinces of Jilin and Liaoning, especially those under the command of Li Haiqing and Zhao Jinglong, tens of thousands were lost in the year-long resistance. Units led by Deng Teme and Wang Delin were also completely decimated.

Thus, groups of fighters were eventually forced to cross the Russian border. Forces under Majom Mountain and Yan Byung-mun merged and continued the resistance at Xing’an, beneath the Dahong'anling watershed of the western branch of the Chinese Eastern Railway. But this would become our final battle, after which we were driven across the Russian border.

We were pushed from Holombayil, passed through Manchuli, and ended up at a place in Russia called Dahuriyā.

It was late October. The cold winds blowing from the Mongolian plains and the highland air of Xing’an had already blanketed the entire area in snow—70 to 80 centimeters deep in shallow areas, and up to 150 or 160 centimeters in deeper parts. Not only had heavy snow fallen, but temperatures continued to drop day by day, reaching minus 35 degrees Celsius.

Tens of thousands of troops were concentrated in one area, all mobilized in a general retreat toward the Russian border. Personally, it felt heavier than the sorrow of a Chinese person leaving their hometown not knowing when they’d return. My emotions were far more complex and weighed down by a sense of unique loss.

As heavy fighting broke out in Jialantun, the severely wounded were transported to the rear. My wife, Maria, had stayed by my side, refusing to leave me, and ended up traveling to Holombayil alongside the wife of Chief Gong Gwang-ui, head of the Manzhouli Railway Police. To secure order in the Holombayil rear zone, Gong led all 180 of his police officers away from the front lines before the military retreated. He prepared 150 to 160 four-wheeled Russian wagons, and while explaining his plan to retreat along the road parallel to the Chinese Eastern Railway, he suggested Maria accompany them out of goodwill. I gratefully entrusted her to their care.

Among the retreating party, the only women were Chief Gong's wife and Maria.

I was entirely preoccupied with commanding operations and had no time to worry about the civilians or the police. Later, while resting the unit at a place called Balimu, a police officer came running to inform me: the police detachment had been ambushed, and something terrible had happened to my wife Maria.

Around 40 or 50 li (approx. 12–15 miles) north of Jialantun, as the convoy of police wagons passed through a narrow valley, they were suddenly attacked by Japanese cavalry and what appeared to be White Russian cavalry. The entire group was slaughtered.

The officer reported that he had seen my wife struck down by a sword.

Even though I had witnessed countless deaths of soldiers during wartime, this was different. This was an incident beyond the boundaries of war. Maria had shared life and death with me on the front lines for so long—words couldn't capture what I felt. My heart was swallowed in anguish.

With heavy hearts, our unit crossed into Russian territory. Across from Manchuli, on the Russian side, was a large strategic and economic border station called Dahuriyā.

Since a foreign military had entered another country's territory, international law dictated we be disarmed. We were automatically disarmed upon crossing the border. Around 20,000 troops had entered Manchuli. We were preoccupied with administrative matters related to handing over our weapons.

Then one early evening, a call came from the outpost.

"Your wife has arrived."

It was an unexpected and surreal message. I felt dazed, like I was sleepwalking. I couldn't grasp what was happening. Was I dreaming? Could it really be? My mind was consumed with confusion and disbelief.

Still, I said, "Let her come in," whoever she might be.

When I first heard her voice, I couldn't recognize her at all. Nature's force had changed this once-delicate woman so drastically—but somehow spared her life. It was as if the mercy of the Creator had saved her.

I could hardly believe my eyes. She no longer looked like the Maria I knew. Her head was swollen like a melon, and her face was wrapped in whatever fur she could find, making it impossible to distinguish her features. Her face was flat and bluish like a bruised clay pot—severely swollen.

Only when she began to speak did I feel certain—my wife had survived.

I hurriedly asked what had happened.

The railway police had been traveling in a column of about 150 wagons when, suddenly, Japanese cavalry attacked from the flank under machine gun cover. The police had no time to dismount or resist—they were slaughtered instantly.

Amid the massacre, the two women sitting in the last wagon jumped out. The sun had just set, and the fading twilight reflected off the snow, making it hard to see even nearby objects.

While jumping off, they fell into a crater formed by frozen, cracked earth. That hole saved their lives, shielding them from the attackers' view. They crawled through it and emerged on the far side of the forest in Udakhachiwon.

Deep in the woods, Maria's feet began to freeze, so she tore off the fur lining inside her coat and wrapped her feet. The two women oriented themselves and walked through the forest for days. They reached Balimu, about 120 li (approx. 40 miles) from where I was stationed.

There, they found shelter in a Chinese stationmaster's house, got some food, and set out again. They reached Yalu Station just as our rear military train was departing. It was only then that they were able to board our military train.

On the way, they endured multiple bombings by Japanese aircraft. Asking directions, being helped along the way—they arrived in Dahuriyā three days later, looking like completely different people.

We were later transported northward, and Maria received daily emergency treatment at a Russian clinic.

The largest regular army unit to cross the Russian border all at once was the 20,000 troops under Majom Mountain and So Byung-mun. Railway staff from the Chinese Eastern Railway also crossed with us.

Civil society group representatives—those who had come to support the anti-Japanese forces—also came. So Byung-mun's division, having retreated all the way from the rear, brought their entire families.

Aside from the organized military, we now had a disorganized mass of civilians with us. Maintaining order was nearly impossible. The sudden change in environment only made it harder. The Siberian cold, which plunged to minus 40 degrees, was far harsher than northern Manchuria.

Upon entering Dahuriyā and completing our disarmament, the Russian side then...

In today's terms, one might call it "national security," but at that time, the Soviet Union feared something else entirely: that the world would learn the misery of its internal political repression, the tragedy of its communist dictatorship, and the suffering of its people under a brutal regime.

Although the Japanese side lodged a strong protest, there wasn't enough time to act on it—and in fact, they didn't do anything at all.

As we entered Dauriya, what caught my eye was their military strategy. I saw more of it later in Tomsk. There, the unity of the Communist Party and the military was palpable—it was clearly a conspiracy rooted in expansionist ideology. The Party and the military operated as one, like a shadow following the body. Every move made by the military was tightly bound to Party oversight and direction.

Even in purely military matters, the Party's executive branch seemed to take precedence over the military command. This is typical of a one-party dictatorship. One thing that truly shocked us among their military capabilities was a logistical trick: Party and military personnel would drive

cars right onto railroad tracks. After a short while, those same cars would speed down the rails like trains. It seemed they swapped out the tires for rail wheels. The transition was so seamless that the cars glided along the tracks like railcars. When they were taken off the rails, they became regular cars again, driving along roads.

At every relatively large station, there was a processing team that could switch automobile wheels to rail wheels and vice versa at any time. Since Siberia had mostly single-track lines and inconvenient transport systems, the Russian Party and military made maximum use of these hybrid car-train vehicles. When an urgent or critical matter arose, the Party or military would contact the station. Upon receiving notice, the station would adjust the timing of regular train traffic along the single line to accommodate these special vehicles. This was one of their contingency plans to ensure rapid military mobility. Even a single car was engineered with meticulous attention to efficiency.

Later, when I arrived in Tomsk, I had several chances to observe their supply warehouses. These warehouses were packed with food. What I saw was mostly side dishes, but the sheer scale was astonishing. Mountains of each type of vegetable were stored separately, and to prevent spoilage, they had used heat to evaporate moisture and preserve them without altering their color. For example, although the vegetables had been dehydrated, they still looked fresh and green. A handful tossed into a pot could instantly become soup. The weight was minimal, and since they were compressed, the volume was also extremely low.

The fish was mostly salmon caught near seas where Siberian freshwater and saltwater mixed. They smoked and dried it, just like Westerners, using fire and smoke. The fish was compressed until it resembled stones, minimizing its volume for storage. As for meat, it was winter, so the carcasses were frozen solid. They were simply chopped and distributed as is. The meat included lamb and horse meat. We were given the horse meat, while the lamb was likely reserved for enemy troops, Party officials, or workers at heavy industry factories.

The vegetables were stored in wooden crates, while fish and meat were kept in raw iron containers. Other side dishes were also categorized and stacked separately. A single warehouse contained enough provisions to feed tens of thousands of people for several months. Later, I learned that other military supplies—equipment, clothing, and so on—were also stored in other warehouses on a similarly massive scale.

These facilities were located throughout the vast forests surrounding Tomsk. At that time, aircraft had not yet developed to the point of conducting long-range bombing raids deep into Russia, even in wartime. Still, the Soviets had already dispersed their military supplies and stockpiles in anticipation. This clearly showed that their Five-Year Plans were focused heavily on defense and the development of heavy industry. Most of all, it highlighted their obsession with military production—a clear sign of their imperialistic ambitions to conquer the world.

Next, we encountered an even more frustrating issue: we couldn’t find anyone on the Russian side who was actually responsible for handling our transportation or accommodations.

The only people we interacted with were from the so-called "Kommandatura Upraveleniye," a kind of military-police or prosecutorial body. They functioned as representatives of the Red Russian regime. They were the ones giving us orders, overseeing our transport, and monitoring us. This made it painfully clear that we had entered a fundamentally different system—one where we were like children lost in a foreign land, trapped in a nation locked by the iron clasp of secrecy.

How suffocating must it have been for people who had lived freely until then? They had no idea what fate awaited them. All they could do was board the train as instructed. They didn't even know where it was going.

When we asked the Russian authorities simple questions—"Where are we headed?", "When will we depart?", "Which stops will we make, and how long will it take?"—no one gave a straight answer. All they ever said was, "I don't know." It felt like shouting at a stone wall. You couldn't get angry. There was no point in expecting anything.

Russian train tracks are the widest in the world, and accordingly, the train cars are enormous. Although these were passenger cars, they weren't equipped for human travel. Inside the vast, freezing cars—where temperatures could drop to minus 40 degrees Celsius—there was no steam heat. Instead, they had placed a crude stove in the middle of the car, which honestly looked less functional than the oil-drum stoves we use today in Korea. It was just a sheet-metal stove beaten into shape, where logs were continuously thrown in to keep warm.

There were no windproof or insulating features on the windows. In the severe cold, you couldn't even get a sip of warm water through the night.

Although the soldiers on board had been disarmed, their units remained intact, and they maintained a relatively orderly structure. Their commands and instructions were followed all the way down the ranks, and a sense of discipline persisted.

The train journey had no schedule. Stops and departures happened randomly. Sometimes, we'd be stuck at a tiny, insignificant station for three or four hours. Even if we asked when the train would leave, no one at the station could give an answer. "Don't know," or "We'll leave when it's time," was all they said.

Unable to contain my curiosity, I got off the front section of the train, where the soldiers were, and walked to the rear section where the civilians were. What I saw was hell on earth. Elderly people, women, children, and other non-combatants had packed into the cars, and although many had thick blankets and warm clothes when they left the rear, the cars had no insulation or heating, and not even hot water was available. It was hell, plain and simple.

Still, these long trains somehow crawled forward along Siberia's single-track lines. Trains coming in the opposite direction had to be carefully scheduled so they could pass at major junctions. But our train seemed to move entirely on a one-way basis—maybe because of us. We never saw a train pass in the other direction. It would stop and go, stop and go, and during the

day, it almost never moved at all. Only at night did it inch forward. But that night would always end quickly, and we'd be stuck again.

It took us seven or eight days to finally reach Krasnoyarsk.

On the way, we imagined things like fairy tales—almost like a story unfolding in a distant land...

When we arrived in Krasnoyarsk, numerous trains were gathered there, transporting regular army troops and volunteer fighters who had crossed the border from Korea into Russia through either Primorsky Krai or Heilongjiang. These troops had come from various regions like Jilin, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang. We saw them from a distance, and they saw us, but of course, there was no communication between us. Still, we all headed north together.

From Novosibirsk, we changed routes and continued north. Three days after leaving the Trans-Siberian Railway, we arrived at our destination: Tomsk. It had taken us over ten days to get there.

Tomsk was blanketed in about 1.5 meters of snow. Surrounding the town was a dense, circular wall of primeval forest. At its center stood a massive, cone-shaped hill—essentially a large, natural fortress. We later learned that Tolstoy had spent his later years writing in Tomsk, and that the world-famous composer Tchaikovsky had also stayed here for a long period composing music.

About 40 li (roughly 16 kilometers) outside of Tomsk, there was an internment camp that had been used during World War I. Originally constructed to house German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war, it could accommodate between 150,000 to 160,000 people. Although decades had passed, the original structures remained intact. Built during the Tsarist era, the construction was very primitive and simple.

The buildings were made by felling logs from the surrounding forest, stacking and overlapping them horizontally. These log structures weren't built with any hygienic or architectural considerations, just for functionality. Each building was large enough to house roughly one battalion. Inside, there was a second level supported by crude platforms—bare wooden planks that hadn't even been planed. Each corner had a ladder. Though they were not multi-story buildings in the true sense, they could house nearly double the number of people compared to a single-floor structure.

The stoves had just been installed—crude, iron barrel-style heaters, with only two per building, one on each side, for an entire battalion. The indoor temperature hovered around minus 35 degrees Celsius.

We had a few goals of our own. First, to minimize surveillance and interference from the Russians as much as possible. Second, even if they did try to manage or oversee us, they didn't know our circumstances, and due to the language barrier, they couldn't really control us. So we resolved to govern ourselves autonomously. Of course, our military unit retained its

organizational structure, and we made sure there was no Russian interference in our ranks. The civilians among us also operated autonomously.

We instituted a representative system and a separation of powers, establishing a form of self-governance. In reality, the only real support Russia provided was food rations. Even then, meals weren't distributed three times a day—morning, noon, and evening—but at first, we were given food in four-day portions. Later, they switched to distributing a week's worth at a time. They did this because they didn't want to bother with daily distribution.

Our staple was bread. In the Russians' eyes, whether soldiers or civilians, we were all unproductive mouths to feed. From the perspective of the Soviet Five-Year Plan, which prioritized productive labor, we were 100 percent consumers, useless guests. The Soviet Union itself was already facing a food shortage and was not producing any daily necessities, focusing solely on heavy industry. Naturally, they couldn't provide us with much. Officers received 450 grams of bread per day, and enlisted men received 700 grams. As for side dishes—vegetables, meat, etc.—they were all pre-dried using some scientific method to prevent spoilage and stored for later use.

From a military perspective, this system made the nature of the Soviet Five-Year Plan clear. They were already preparing for war, whether proactively or reactively. Their plan involved manufacturing equipment for arms production and stockpiling emergency rations that could sustain them during prolonged conflict. This was proof that they were expecting war at any time.

Each person was allotted just 200 grams of vegetables per day—a tiny amount. When boiled, it barely became a broth. In addition, we received salt and sugar. As for meat, it was mostly horse meat. They slaughtered old horses and gave us that instead of beef or pork. We never even saw a single piece of beef.

Although this might seem like a trivial matter, even the bread ration alone was enough to reveal the nature of Red Russia. The fact that they gave officers and enlisted men different rations showed that Soviet communism was deliberately trying to sow class division within our ranks. I could clearly see this. If we were all unproductive mouths to feed, there was no reason to differentiate between officers and enlisted men—yet they did.

The 450 grams were hardly worth mentioning, and even the 700 grams of bread was only about the size of two fists. An absurdly insufficient amount. And we were told to make that last for three meals a day—or eat twice, or just eat it all at once. However we chose to eat it, it left us constantly hungry. The portions were just enough to irritate the stomach and cause hunger pangs. Naturally, our bodies became weak and sluggish. The cold was unbearable, biting into our bones. Our stomachs stuck to our backs, and we had trouble standing upright from fatigue. We didn't have the strength to do anything, not even move.

Later, we realized this was part of the Communist Party's ruthless policy.

In the early stages of the Russian proletarian revolution, they had targeted intellectuals as their enemies and fought to eliminate them. But the real driving force of society wasn't labor—it was

intellect. So after their so-called labor revolution, the Soviets held the intelligentsia responsible for past offenses and sought to wipe them out. They wanted to completely drain the intellectuals, prevent them from thinking, moving, or even speaking. That's why they gave officers only 450 grams of bread. They were applying the same revolutionary standards to us as they had to their own people.

The Russian intelligentsia were described as the people sitting at office desks in every workplace. The idea was that since they didn't perform physical labor, they didn't need to eat. As long as they didn't collapse and die, that was considered enough. The policy of the Russian Communist Party at the time was to seat them and essentially mummify them to death.

Then, after the Third Five-Year Plan, the goal shifted toward education. A cultural movement began, and there emerged a recognized need to cultivate an intelligentsia suited for a communist society. The previous policy had been to exterminate the aristocratized intelligentsia of the capitalist era.

In our country, find me a major businessman, someone with money or power, who doesn't have a shiny, greasy face or who isn't visibly well-fed. Such a contrast to back then. Among those who had graduated from university during Tsarist Russia or who had once held leadership roles in society, those who had survived all looked like they had come from an opium den. Not a single one could walk straight. They all staggered. It was because they hadn't been fed.

Regardless of their schemes to divide us internally or incite class conflict, what mattered most was that we rely on self-governance and stand on our own. Our hometowns had become distant memories, and the dream of returning felt like an illusion. This sentiment filled Tomsk during its bitter, stormy winters. Preventing internal divisions and hostilities became an urgent priority. Since infiltration was always a possibility, we worked hard to eliminate contradictions within our self-governing structure and ensure they couldn't penetrate.

In the military, sometimes mutual suspicion even led to reordering our living conditions or chopping firewood. Even though the soldiers themselves were underfed, they voluntarily did physical labor out of concern for their officers. They even shoveled snow. Saying they "shoveled snow" might sound easy, like sweeping a yard, but it was no such thing. Snow piled up inches every day. On top of that, we didn't receive proper snow-clearing equipment. So we had to push the snow aside using nothing but manpower.

Even though Tomsk was a desolate exile zone, we had to keep the fire burning daily. This required an enormous amount of firewood, which the soldiers had to gather themselves.

Although Russian guards watched us from the outside, we conducted our own internal security. In essence, it was like the Korean War-era Geoje Island POW camp. Soldiers took turns standing guard and monitoring the rooms at night. Officers, knowing soldiers needed 1.2 kg of food per day just to survive, worried how they could handle all the labor on only 700g. So they voluntarily gave up 50g out of their 450g ration to the soldiers.

From what we knew, Russian soldiers at the time were eating 1.2 kg a day, and heavy industrial laborers were reportedly receiving up to 1.6 kg.

There was no piped water system to keep water from freezing, so we melted ice to drink. As for dishes, each person was issued just one *gurushka*—a small steel container with a short handle, not aluminum but iron, with ceramic coating on the inside. When eating bread, which was our staple, we would ladle soup into the *gurushka* and eat it together.

After eating, if we wanted water, we had to share from a large cauldron where melted ice was stored. For washing up, since there were no washbasins, we'd pour water into our *gurushka*, rinse our mouths, and then use the rest to wash our faces. We didn't pour water from the cup—we would sip it, then spit it into our palms and wash that way.

Even this kind of life was bearable during the day. But at night, it became unbearable. No matter how much firewood we shoved into the two stoves, the rooms were so large they couldn't retain heat. It wasn't an airtight building, people kept going in and out, and the cold air rushed through the log cabin like waves. The chill was beyond words.

Those like So Byung-mun, who had retreated from the rear, sometimes brought blankets, coats, or even small amounts of flour. But frontline troops like us, who had just withdrawn from battle under Major Ma Jeom-san's command, along with their families, endured unspeakable hardship.

My wife, who was close to death and barely recovered, ended up with frostbite again before she had even healed from the last round. With starvation and cold stabbing at us like knives, the winter nights of Northern Siberia were nothing less than nights of death.

One story is both laughable and heartbreaking. My wife and I lived on the top floor of the barracks. For bedding, we laid her overcoat on the wooden boards, and for a blanket, we used mine. The cold made it impossible to sleep. Hunger made us need to urinate. But getting up was tricky. On the floor below were acquaintances from the rear, using the flour they had brought to bake rice cakes all night by the stove.

If they had been like the Chinese—warm-hearted or at least outwardly considerate—it would've been easier. But no one could match the Korean obsession with appearances. If we got up, they would feel compelled to offer us food out of shared hardship. But to accept would mean depriving them. And to refuse? That would be an obvious lie.

So, when my wife tried to get up, I twisted her arm to stop her. When I tried to move, she pinched me to hold me back. We restrained each other to avoid an awkward situation.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I was appointed by the self-governing committee as the liaison officer to the Russian supply depot, responsible for coordinating food rations for nearly 70,000 of our people. There were several reasons for my appointment.

At the time, the old saying "You have to eat to live" felt like an undeniable truth. Previous representatives had been caught exploiting their positions, stealing supplies for personal gain

rather than serving everyone faithfully. With so many hungry, such selfishness led to major problems.

Because of that, public opinion began to turn in my favor. I came to be known as someone fair and conscientious. People said, "He's someone with integrity, someone we can trust." That's how I was recommended and then elected unanimously.

Secondly, although my Russian wasn't fluent, I could speak enough for communication, which made me a suitable choice. Third, my status in the military earned me respect and compliance, making it easier to maintain order.

I became the representative responsible for receiving supplies every three days, with four assistants appointed under me. Thanks to this, I obtained a "propiska" — an official passport allowing free and unrestricted entry and exit at any time. This meant I could enter any building in Tomsk city freely, while my fellow prisoners could not step even one step outside the camp.

Among roughly 70,000 troops under General Maj. Gen. [name omitted], only six or seven high-ranking officers had to submit a reason to the Russian prosecution and receive a permit for temporary exit if they needed to leave the camp. But I was granted the special privilege to come and go freely at any time. Without this, I would have had to visit the supply depot multiple times a day, which was impossible. That's why I was given this permit.

Taking advantage of this, I freely entered Tomsk city and observed what life under the communist system was really like. I also saw how they pursued social transformation under communism, and by what means.

The first and foremost thing was the oppression of freedom. Like any dictatorship, there was absolutely no freedom of movement in Russia. If someone wanted to leave their registered residence, they had to apply for and receive a propiska. Once granted, the local security agency was immediately notified and would monitor the applicant's every move upon arrival.

People living in those cold regions had a complicated relationship with alcohol — almost no Russian was a nondrinker. After the revolution, a complete prohibition was imposed, allowing only beer. Beer was slightly more expensive than other goods. The currency itself was issued behind iron bars by the government, essentially worthless — more like vouchers than real money. Nobody even knew if the government backing the currency existed. So citizens treated the currency as mere certificates of numbers, not as real money.

Since there was no free market, you couldn't buy anything with that money outside official channels. At best, it worked as a coupon in workplace cooperatives. Even if you held rubles given at work, there was nowhere to spend them. When government-approved goods were issued, you could exchange your vouchers at the cooperative, but that was all.

This left civilians in extreme poverty. In beer halls, one could see the political mood of the common people under the regime. Without press freedom, no one dared speak their mind aloud.

Nobody knew if the person next to them was a secret police informant, so people simply stayed silent, wearing sullen expressions.

A beer cost about 70 cents in domestic money — not for a glass, but a bowl — and was decent quality. For about a tenth more, you could get a small piece of sher, a cheese-like solid milk product, barely enough to see. Each person drank beer with their own thoughts, desires, and emotions clearly visible. Surveillance and control were so strict that even family members, including wealthy siblings, couldn't speak freely with each other.

Most houses were wooden and several decades old. The Russian government confiscated all private homes, merged them with state property, and redistributed them by workplace. The workplace decided allocations, which were uniform across communist regions: two meals and one room. There was no need for a kitchen, as prepared food was supplied by the workplace. Workers were tools of their workplace; their existence as individuals was not allowed.

Those who didn't work had no means to survive and simply wasted away. There was no practice of people pooling or cutting back their rations to feed someone else. Everyone had to have a job. They received their rations at appointed times.

Husbands and wives often worked at different places. Even though they worked eight hours daily, their workplaces differed, so they rarely ate together. Even if they succeeded early and exceeded production targets, the party encouraged competition, allowing no leniency. They had to work more than eight hours daily, and time together at home was unpredictable. If they returned home at similar times, they might share a meal once a week, bringing home their dinner rations. But soups or broths couldn't be taken home, so dinner consisted mostly of rice cakes and side dishes placed on a table in the middle of the room — a rare moment of pleasure.

When a child was born, the mother nursed and rocked the baby to sleep, then left the child at a designated daycare near the workplace while she worked. Babies under 100 days old were given age-appropriate toys and cared for by a nanny all day. The nanny fed them milk, and at day's end, the mother picked up the child, put them to bed, and collapsed from exhaustion.

Fundamentally, the family system was denied and destroyed to raise new citizens loyal to the communist party and devoted to their workplaces. This was especially emphasized in the "worker-peasant state," where the goal was to create an elite cadre of proletariat and peasants. Destroying the traditional family, the basic social unit, was the core political aim.

Since I had the opportunity, I also visited the farms around Tomsk. When I called out from outside in the cold winter, "Is anyone there?" there was no answer. Once, after calling several times, I heard a faint mosquito-like buzzing sound, but no one appeared. Inside, there was a *puryta* — a type of stove made by stacking bricks on a stone floor, similar to a Russian *pechka* (stove). Inside it, there was something called a *duhoka* used for baking bread. The flat surface on top of the *puryta* was covered with ashes and coal. Children came out of the stove area. They had only heads and limbs; their bodies were severely underdeveloped. They were all physically deformed, with thin fingers like those of someone with congenital syphilis, and their heads were oddly shaped. Although these children were of a considerable age, their nutritional deficiency

had stunted their growth. They were neither cattle nor horses but had been so severely abused and neglected.

This was the harsh reality forced upon them. What's worse, these children were considered the future citizens of their country, but back then, they were viewed as unproductive consumers and barely cared for. If a child died, so be it; if they survived, fine, but no real effort was made to care for them. After the revolutionary tide had passed, there were still occasional visits to the so-called free markets where black bread was sometimes available. Most of it was made from buckwheat flour, mixed with straw powder—food horses or cows would eat in winter. This bread was almost always traded through barter, exchanging with scraps of old underwear or used clothes rather than bought with money.

Sometimes, blankets were wrapped around bottles of milk or one or two bottles would be brought in. That was the "free market" of the common people.

Meanwhile, in order to compensate for the technological and scientific backwardness that had resulted from the revolution's chaos and to develop industry, Russia brought in many foreign engineers and technicians, especially from the United States and Germany. To maintain their accustomed lifestyles, special measures were taken. Although there were no foreign travelers in general, trading companies were set up to provide conveniences to these technicians and travelers. It was very much like the #% (unreadable reference). Even Western European luxury goods were stocked there. Everything, from meat to groceries, was carefully prepared.

The shops became a gathering place for the exhausted and oppressed, especially former nobles who were now suspects of the Communist Party, former officials of the Tsarist regime, and intellectuals. These people constantly observed and commented on the dazzling display of goods, their mouths never dry from talking. The abundance of luxurious goods almost drove them mad.

This was partly to attract dollars by providing comfort to foreign technicians and partly to enforce the goals of the revolution. The shops also secretly absorbed precious personal property —silverware, jewels, and the like—allowing the state to control these assets tightly for strict economic regulation. For example, families would bring silverware or fine textiles and exchange them for food. It was a place where even the last remaining possessions of malnourished people on the verge of death were seized.

Most of the dollars paid to American technicians were absorbed here.

Given the poverty and hunger faced by the masses, social atmosphere was tense. Fear permeated the public, causing unease and sleepless nights. Just as no one was free of dust, going back five or six years revealed a time when nearly everyone under the communist regime was accused of counterrevolutionary crimes. This was after the execution of Tukhachevsky, the former defense minister and a scapegoat for Stalin's purges. The military was a primary target of these purges.

At night, around the streets near Lagel, the sound of small footsteps echoed loudly. In a cold region with little snow moisture, the crisp sound of boots crunching on the frozen ground was clear. Usually, from around one in the morning, the noise started and continued through the cold

hours of one or two o'clock. Unable to sleep due to the chill, if one peered outside, the scene was like the Japanese police arrests during the colonial period: faces covered to prevent identification, faces veiled to prevent seeing out.

They would be taken away in groups, sometimes seven to ten at a time, silently and without a word. Few looked outside, and no one dared to speak of it. The fate of those arrested around five in the evening was unknown—where they were taken, what trial they faced, what their verdict was, nobody knew. No one witnessed executions or saw any evidence of what happened. The rows of prisoners disappeared quietly almost every night. The atmosphere was thick with fear and anxiety. The purges continued relentlessly under this oppressive system.

This country was a place of sadness, where joy and laughter were rare.

Sometimes, out of curiosity, I asked what had happened to certain people—asking strangers, pub owners, or acquaintances I met over drinks. Not once did anyone confidently answer my questions.

Russia was a melting pot of all Asian ethnic groups. At first glance, people might seem Chinese, Mongolian, or Japanese. Because all the various ethnic groups that entered Soviet Russia were expected to openly demonstrate loyalty to the Party, everyone was supposed to be equal there. As a result, no one could be sure who was a Party member or who might be a secret police informant (*gppau*). No one spoke openly or trusted anyone.

Clothing was mostly worn-out hand-me-downs, decades old and patched repeatedly. New clothes were not produced. No one wore new clothing, not even one man or woman.

For example, when 70,000 Chinese soldiers entered Tomsk, they started selling what they could not endure wearing as their issued uniforms. I don't believe it's like that now, but back then, the legacy of corruption and abuse from Tsarist Russia lingered. The practice of bribery was widespread everywhere. Even the soldiers on guard or prison officials were often bribed by Chinese soldiers, who sold their old rags and tools unavailable in Russia for money.

At that time, Russians loved watches so much that I believe more than half of the watches owned by those 70,000 Chinese soldiers circulated in Tomsk.

Some desperate people even sold their outer garments for bread.

Education was still limited; there were no middle schools or universities. Training was done through short-term courses at *erafak* (worker training centers) as needed. Later, these became retraining schools, and layers of schools were established, gradually specializing in various fields.

The most surprising thing was the military education at Arapka. They didn't call it military training but rather "Defense Education to Protect the Workers' and Peasants' State." Even

female workers practiced dismantling and reassembling rifles, submachine guns, and other weapons at night. In the pitch-black darkness, they trained to break down the parts and then reassemble them perfectly by feel alone within seconds, so they could carry the weapons and fire immediately.

Among compulsory elementary school subjects, the most important was the pioneer movement —the young pioneer corps. Children were organized and educated according to Party guidelines. Young people were organized through the Komsomol and were taught not just education but also organizational life and military duties from the start.

Overall, there were no social welfare facilities; what was rapidly and brilliantly developing was the military. The “Glasny Almi” — the Red Army — had the best training, equipment, organization, and ideological education. The revolution was considered “armed,” so guarding the Red Army was the highest priority. Workers in industry and Party members received the same top-level respect as the military. It was clear to the eye that neither Party members nor soldiers indulged in luxury or vanity, neglecting their duties.

At that time, officers had insignias made by combining different types of stars — a shape formed by placing four stars together — to lower the rank symbolically, unlike the U.S. or other Western armies. Even four-star generals wore these insignias.

Generals, even those in their 60s with swollen legs and bent backs, carried their own belongings when not on official duty. Private property was forbidden, so they had no personal cars or horses, which was natural. For example, to visit their unit and have a meal with their family, an officer would carry a 5-kilogram loaf of bread and side dishes by hand, remove their sword, tuck it under their arm, and walk there personally.

Unlike other countries, there was no aide or orderly to carry their belongings. How could a senior officer carry their own things? There was no pride in glorifying military tradition like in Germany or Japan. This is something worth noting and critically examining, even if it may seem unusual.

At first, when I went out on the streets, I wondered why so many high-ranking officers were in a town that was neither a military city nor particularly large. Later, I realized that Party, government, and military personnel were unified and integrated by rank. Everyone was required to wear military uniforms. If a person changed position, it was common for a senior Party member to become a military division or corps commander. Those with administrative ranks like brigadier general could also occupy such posts. Party, government, and military roles could be freely transferred as needed by the highest governing body.

This made it immediately clear that this was a Communist Party-led state where everything was completely controlled by the Party. The Party’s ultimate goal was to thoroughly build a

communist society, which meant the total eradication of religious freedom and family-oriented ideology. Next was the suppression and purging of all ideological and behavioral deviations from communism. Everything was based on Marxist philosophy to build a new culture.

Economically, they pursued thorough collectivization, confiscating all private livestock and land in society and redistributing it. At that time, Russia had almost no foreign diplomacy and was isolated externally. Yet it claimed to be a workers' and peasants' state, emphasizing agriculture because it was originally a primitive agricultural country. In reality, however, the entire national and Party power was concentrated on industrialization.

Individual farmers were not given land to farm as we think of it. All farmers lost their privately owned land, which was instead distributed in collective farm units led by the Party. These collective farms, called kolkhozes in Russian, became the basic farming unit. Farmers who didn't join these collectives, or those not yet integrated due to lack of manpower, were left on the margins, facing starvation. They received no rations and survived by barely scraping by on potatoes or buckwheat planted in unofficial plots before collectivization took full control. The plight of these farmers was indescribably tragic.

Since freedom was nonexistent, all media was tightly controlled and freedom of the press was completely suppressed. People were only allowed to listen — there was no choice to hear anything else. The only thing permitted was to listen to Party propaganda, and after listening, accepting it without complaint or criticism was mandatory.

The Party's propaganda often said things like, "Heroes emerged from the heavy industry factories of such and such place, and several enthusiastic Party members were honored." This was exactly the same as what North Korea would later learn to do. Everything else in the propaganda was just numbers. When I hear percentage reports today, I can't help but be skeptical. Whether it was true or not, there was no way to verify. Most of it was lies.

The conclusion was always that if we work hard, soon all Russian citizens will enjoy butter and white bread, and occasionally good meat. That was the message.

The Russians apparently longed for coffee, which was unavailable at the time. The only coffee-like drink came from Kazakhstan, where spoiled threads and husks were roasted in an oven, then boiled in water and consumed — that was their coffee. The propaganda said we would soon be able to drink coffee from South America or Africa, and urged people to endure and work harder, even using coffee as motivation.

Historically, Russia was ruled by monarchs who maintained control through a policy of keeping the people ignorant. Religion was a tool for this. For example, they instilled the belief that everyone must bathe once a week. In a cold place like Russia, where water was scarce, weekly bathing for men, women, and children was no small matter. Of course, bathing facilities were not like ours where you immerse yourself in hot water. Most baths were a type of steam bath.

These baths, called Turkish baths, were small steam rooms that also served for laundry. It was said that if you didn't bathe and wash clothes on Saturday, you would go to hell later. That's why

even poor villagers in the Siberian wilderness bathed every Saturday. They would clean their homes and wash even the smallest curtains or tablecloths to renew their living space.

Since ancient times, higher education was a privilege reserved for the elite. In Moscow, there was a national university whose academic standards were not inferior to those in France. Only nobles or the sons of large landowners were allowed to enter. Ordinary commoners' children could only see universities as unattainable — more like a mirage that could only offer illusions and comfort their thirst from afar. They neither could enter nor did they have any real need to.

Yet daily life was very rational and hygienic, with many scientific aspects. The common people had internalized customs that discouraged evil deeds and promoted good ones, much like the folktales of Nolbu and Heungbu. This fostered social order and cultivated a sense of public virtue. It also bred a spirit of mutual help within society.

However, the revolution's goal was class struggle. So schools that provided higher education became targets of revolutionary hostility, much like churches. Having attended a prestigious school was proof that one belonged to the privileged class — nobles or landlords. That is why intellectuals were persecuted after the revolution.

Because there was no established system or statistical method to organize society after the revolution, the ignorant working class exploited the intellectuals, using them for their own purposes. But no matter how much the intellectuals were indoctrinated, publicly criticized, or pressured to show they had changed their views, it was only superficial. The surveillance and abuse against them grew so deep that it was beyond description. Since the formerly oppressed class had become dominant, they developed a vindictive nature. Those people aimed to completely uproot the old knowledge and instead focus on nurturing an iron-willed communist intellectual class.

As I mentioned earlier, they invited Americans and Germans to bring in scientific technology. Foreign technical experts were so eager to enter Russia because of the extensive propaganda that promised them maximum support and convenience in everyday life. They were given the best houses, the finest food, and every possible comfort — but were not allowed to take any money out, so they had to save it while there. The idea was to cultivate loyal communist comrades or devoted cadres through this method.

However, if even a slight possibility of dissent arose, they would drain the experts of all their knowledge and later label one or two as spies. These cases often became fabricated spy trials. Several well-known foreign engineers ended up condemned and executed just before their sentences.

Meanwhile, the children of steadfast communist party members were selected and educated to become trustworthy individuals, serving as aides to those experts. The Soviets' success with their space program and other achievements was partly due to this system. This was the combined brainpower of scientists captured during the global war.

When I entered Tomsk, the respect and admiration Russians had for the United States was boundless. Even uneducated peasants would proudly say, “This is American-made,” when borrowing a piece of farming equipment made of metal. They considered American goods the highest honor — to the point where “American-made” meant the best quality.

At the same time, the hatred and hostility communist party members harbored toward the United States was intense. The core message of political education on “American imperialism” was grounded in the fact that America was a capitalist country. Since communism and capitalism had fundamentally different philosophies and ideologies, the population was thoroughly taught to see American democracy as the opposite system to communism. Communist rulers insisted their interpretation of American democracy was absolutely wrong and propagated this viewpoint vigorously.

Meanwhile, a few rare American politicians tried to approach the Soviet Union with hopes of peaceful coexistence. Of course, during World War II, the United States supported the Soviets in defeating Hitler — a force stronger than Napoleon — pushing all the way to Smolensk, so there was some cooperation. The Soviets and their allies made efforts to get closer politically from many angles. Nixon is even said to have planned a visit to the Soviet Union.

However, the Soviet Union and its satellite states’ attitude toward the U.S., especially toward democracy, was not a simple matter. Politically, there might be fluctuations, but their true intention was to destroy American democracy. Although they lacked the power to act on it openly, it was naïve to think they would ever help sustain lasting peace. The peace between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was a temporary political arrangement. Their fundamental ideological rivalry could never be resolved overnight.

As the Soviet Union succeeded in their Five-Year Plans, they gradually established diplomatic relations with countries one by one. Particularly, they took American scientists as “unofficial prisoners,” absorbed all their knowledge and skills without paying a cent, and then expelled them. They exploited these scientists to the point of swallowing their homelands’ technology before sending them away. This is a memory that many countries still clearly remember.

On the other hand, there were some good aspects about Russia. For one, there was no racial discrimination. The Communist Party gave priority opportunities to oppressed ethnic minorities and colonial subjects who had fled to Russia for refuge and believed in Soviet communism. For example, the cultural director in Tomsk was a couple of years younger than me and had a strange connection to me — he was married to my maternal cousin’s younger sister. Out of concern for his privacy, I won’t use his name. I first met him by chance in Tomsk city. His appearance was unmistakably Korean, so I spoke to him first. Longing for my homeland and compatriots, I started the conversation. Blood proved thicker than water.

Although he was a trusted member of the Russian Communist Party, he deeply missed his homeland and compatriots and openly talked about everything. I addressed him as “Kim Yo-du,” using his alias. When he spoke about his wife and mentioned that her maternal cousin was married to “Amugae,” he unknowingly used my real name. I asked him if he knew where Amugae might be now.

At that moment, my national affection and conscience could no longer hide the truth from him — I told him, “I am Amugae.” I didn’t think about what would happen next. When I left Tomsk, I once again deeply felt that blood ties were stronger than ideology. No matter how committed a Communist Party member might be, a person’s ethnic identity and humanity still remain. I learned about the deep internal affairs of the Communist Party through him.

Another remarkable thing was public order. There was never any disorder anywhere. It might have been strict, but their virtue demanded it. Around us, when waiting for a taxi, many would cut in line, but in Russia, everything was rationed, and transportation was scarce. Yet whether at the station or a ration distribution center, no one ever broke the order. It was a natural, accepted behavior — no one was anxious or tried to push ahead. People waited their turn in the order they arrived. Tomsk, known as a cultural city in Siberia, had many art exhibitions and theaters where this order was strictly observed.

Finally, there was no sign of moral decay. In Seoul, efforts were made to correct moral decline — cracking down on hippies’ hairstyles, banning miniskirts, or regulating pants. At that time, Russian women didn’t wear makeup or even use pomade. Cosmetics and hair products simply didn’t exist.

Makeup requires the kind of lifestyle that allows it. People were busy at work and exhausted, so there was little reason to go out. Furthermore, party education meant organizing group activities that stretched late into the night, leaving almost no free time. Clothing was rationed and only given to working people once every few months.

Wool clothes don’t wear out that easily, so people wore them for a long time. Underwear, on the other hand, wore out quickly and had to be repaired or replaced, which made wearing makeup impractical. Luxuries only appear when there is enough free time in one’s daily life. Moreover, several factors must come together harmoniously for luxury to truly manifest. While hard labor surely played a part, the robust, rosy faces of young people overcoming the bitter cold in remote areas looked more attractive and full of life than women who wore makeup heavily. In the end, makeup was just a distant dream, something you couldn’t really afford to consider, so it was no exaggeration to say that there were virtually no luxury items at all.

Regarding normal leisure activities, for example opera or art exhibitions, our country had none of the numerous “tearooms,” coffee shops, or the like. How could there have been “go-go” dancing, or “nightclubs”? Such things simply didn’t exist. While they weren’t overtly opposed, the dryness and austerity of life made such frivolities impossible. Objectively, if you look at the whole picture, there was nowhere to waste time and money in pointless competition for luxury.

Transportation was extremely lacking and inconvenient. For long distances, of course, there was no choice but to use the uncomfortable trains. But for short distances, since it was cold winter weather, people didn’t walk slowly—they ran. Places like ration distribution centers, workplaces, and schools were all part of a collective daily routine, so the distances weren’t really that far. Shoes were made from something called “cadarik.” The value of a pair of cadarik wasn’t determined by size, but by weight and the softness and quality of the inner fur lining. You had to wear over ten pounds of cadarik on your feet. Cadarik shoes were made by pressing and weaving

light fur taken from reindeer hides into the shape of a shoe. One pair weighed as much as a five-kilogram sack of sugar. Without wearing cadarik, your feet would freeze and you couldn't move. People wore cadarik and then used sleds to travel short distances.

For even shorter distances, they wore "boots" over their shoes, which were like overshoes. The boots had thick rubber soles, while inside the shoes, they wore fur socks. Wearing fur socks inside the shoes and then putting on boots allowed them to run comfortably even on icy roads. Everyone, young and old, ran like that. In the mornings, at the time to go to school or work, the sound of footsteps made a loud clacking noise: "ddak-ddak-ddak." It was the sound of running on frozen ground. When urine hit the frozen ground, it made a "hoot-ttuk" sound as it splattered. Another characteristic of the Tomsk winter was the "duman," a thick frost similar to fog in temperate regions, but it was not fog. It was more like frost mist—frozen vapor. When the air temperature dropped and the air froze, duman formed, obscuring visibility to just five steps ahead. It was even denser than fog, reducing sight distances drastically. Duman occurred about three weeks each winter, piling up to several hundred meters above the ground, creating a thick, continuous layer covering the entire area.

This duman distorted the daylight into a strange, milky light. The people of Tomsk protected their exposed faces by coating them with animal fat—bear grease—to prevent freezing. There was no leisurely shopping or slow strolls by the fireside. Such things simply did not exist there. This made Tomsk feel very much like Russia itself. Although running in this weather must have been agonizing, it was required by law to reach your destination. I also believe that running was not mentally painful for them.

Knowing a few words of Russian, I was able to leave the group occasionally to pick up supplies, giving me some free time and unique opportunities to interact with the local townspeople. I had a chance to witness everything I've just described firsthand. However, inside the camp, the 70,000 soldiers and their families lived under severe restrictions. They didn't even know what would become of them in the future or what they were supposed to do inside the camp. There was nowhere to get water. Talking to any Russian was useless, as no one gave clear answers. The only responses were "Ya ne znayu" (I don't know) and "Net" (No). Spending cold winter nights was painful enough, but the snow piled so deeply that it felt like a winter that lasted only half as long as in Korea, with barely any chance for temperatures to rise. Moreover, the white auroras meant there was no dark evening, making sleep difficult. Just as you were about to fall asleep, the sounds of creaking and whistling cold winds would sweep in, breaking even your lightest sleep.

Hungry days and nights, restless harsh nights! Amid this fog of hardship, nerves grew razor sharp. The common regret was, "Why didn't I just die in the war?" Despite their sorrow and despair, the Chinese prisoners never lost hope. Their faith in their distant homeland —"Motherland"—boosted their spirits. "We have a government," they said to themselves, believing that the government cared about the 70,000 of them who fought in Manchuria and who had been driven into the remote Tomsk corner of Asia. They hoped and believed that the Chinese government would take interest and negotiate on their behalf. Yet they worried because Russia and China had no formal diplomatic relations and no official channels. Still, they trusted the government would fulfill its responsibilities sooner or later.

In other words, it showed how much the people trusted their government. Even after enduring the long, lonely Manchurian war and suffering such hardships, their faith in their leaders remained strong. First was faith in their country, second was faith in their government. These two things were the source of their hope and the energy to live each day.

I want to write a few more things about a certain schoolmate of mine who was also closely connected to my family by blood ties. He was once the head of the cultural department in Tomsk, and his passionate patriotism and love for his country and homeland were as strong as mine, so we talked openly. Our family could meet only with my wife's younger sister and her husband outside. Maria, my wife's cousin, and her husband made time to visit us about twice a month in the camp. Maria was fluent in Russian and helped me with obtaining scarce supplies, with the cooperation of the Russian side. Because my wife and I could go out together, we took the opportunity to meet with them. Maria's cousin Nyura's younger sister, Shura, was also in the camp, so they visited us regularly. Shura was about ten years old then. The three of them visiting us was a monthly event. Each time they came, they saved their ration cards to bring us extra supplies. Although Maria was officially the head of the cultural department and received 1,100 grams of bread, she often brought us leftovers, claiming it was because she wasn't healthy enough to eat it all herself. But in reality, it was her thoughtful way of sharing what she saved for us. Besides bread, they also brought tea and frozen meat, which they didn't eat themselves but gave to us. Whenever we met, I tried to learn more about the inner workings of Russian society through our conversations, and I also heard news from my wife's family.

My wife's relatives numbered thirty-seven, some of them quite old. My wife's mother had 15 siblings. All of them did their part well. Among them, the fifth brother, Onam, graduated from the Soviet Communist University and Military Academy after the Russian Revolution. He served as the cultural and political director in Blagoveshchensk, a major Russian city near the site of the Black River Incident, where our independent army suffered a heavy defeat. This place was a strategic center in Siberia. Onam had a love affair with a nun from the Russian Orthodox Church, which made him almost a criminal by the regime's standards. Because many nuns and clergy came from noble families, they were targets of revolutionary suppression and persecution.

They were accused of being counterrevolutionaries simply because they had romantic relationships during the revolution. They were forcibly deported by the railroad from Leningrad (then called Petrograd) towards Finland, via the Karelian Isthmus, in severe freezing conditions. There, they were forced to do manual labor, breaking frozen ground using only hoes and shovels.

At that time in Russia, tractors were extremely scarce, so the physically strongest prisoners were made to dig the frozen earth with just basic tools. Although this has been proven, Russia—after swallowing up the small Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia following the revolution—was pushing northward to invade Finland. The invasion of Finland was intended as a stepping stone toward Scandinavia.

The Soviet Red Army advanced through this forced labor, trying to break through Finland's Mannerheim Line defense. The brutal military strategy was to dig this canal in freezing cold, under starvation and exhaustion, which killed many of the prisoners. They suffered from frostbite, extreme exhaustion, and were given meager rations consisting of black buckwheat flour

mixed with plain wheat flour. The nutrition was so poor they could barely endure the hunger. Prisoners picked undigested grains resembling barley from horse dung, washed them in water, roasted them, and ate them just to survive.

Out of 37 families, most were accused of counterrevolutionary crimes or economic offenses, and all died. Even though they were promised a "heaven on earth," the severity of the restrictions against romance revealed the true nature of Red Russia—a living hell.

Only one younger sister survived and was known to be the secretary of the local Communist Party in Khabarovsk, Siberia, but contact was lost and her fate unknown.

Later, when Russia invaded Finland, it became clear that the propaganda was misleading. Russia, claiming to fight imperialism, revealed itself as a sinister red empire, pursuing self-interest under the guise of revolution.

Not long ago, a story I had was introduced in the weekly magazine *Jugan Chosun*, and my romance story—originally a novel titled *Arctic Wind* (serial no. 1660008)—was even adapted into a film in Taiwan a few years ago. Maria, who had severe frostbite that partially healed, spent her days teaching Russian horses to Chinese soldiers. Looking back now, it might seem naive, but it was never just a romance. By chance, I met a woman from Poland who longed for her homeland and, like us, had been colonized multiple times.

At first, she thought I was just an interpreter for the General Staff. When she learned I was Korean, we bonded deeply. Our mutual longing for our countries formed a heartfelt connection.

After I returned to mainland China, a writer familiar with the complex experiences of the Liberation Army pressured me to share my story for a novel. He was so moved that he insisted I write the manuscript. Despite my initial reluctance, I felt it was my duty to introduce the loyalty and patriotism of our people to the Chinese, in hopes of gaining their support for Korea's liberation. That novel was published under the title *Arctic Wind*. The theme of Korea's plight surely drew many readers. Decades later, it became popular in Taiwan and was turned into a film.

Because filming in the vast, icy wilderness of Russia was difficult, the producers spent hundreds of thousands of won to shoot scenes in Japan's northernmost island, Hokkaido, which resembled the Russian landscape. This is similar to the Hollywood movie *Zorba the Greek* being filmed in Spain.

Years passed, and the thick snow covering Tomsk slowly melted. Snow piled on trees until it froze and cracked; the snow-covered trees began shedding their winter coats little by little, revealing their trunks. Even the sky over Tomsk, once shrouded in gloom, began to brighten with sunlight. Drops of water fell from the pine trees at the edge of the forest... it was spring.

As the old saying goes, when you enter the deep mountains, time seems to stop. In our harsh and isolated life, we truly lost track of time.

By then, more than seven months had passed since I arrived in Tomsk. Word came that a high-ranking official from Moscow was visiting General Ma Jeom's camp. It was like a small ship discovering a new island while crossing the ocean—a sign something good was coming. The staff meeting was called, and the situation became clear.

Dr. An Hye-gyeong, a famous diplomat who had served twice as an armed officer in the Chinese Nationalist government, was sent as an envoy from France to Moscow to establish direct contact with the Russian government. This was a crucial step toward reopening the severed diplomatic ties between Russia and China. It was no exaggeration to say the normalization of diplomatic relations was made possible because the 70,000 troops were stationed in Tomsk. That was the opportunity.

Dr. Min had been active for over a month and a half, but for us in Tomsk, nothing was apparent yet. The negotiations were done behind closed doors. Eventually, it was decided that Russia would send us back home. Dr. Min succeeded in getting us to China. Beyond that, we knew nothing—only the agreed-upon method for our return was disclosed. Based on that, we completed all preparations.

First, about 70,000 combat troops, under the command of responsible officers, would be transported by train. The route was planned through Kazakhstan, crossing Tacheng (#) near Xinjiang, where China was developing nuclear weapons, then into Xinjiang and further into Chinese territory. High-ranking officers and staff assigned by the Nationalist government would receive specific orders in Moscow and follow those commands. Personnel numbers were restricted to 60 or fewer.

Second, the rest of the civilians, military personnel, women, elderly, and infirm would be transported by train to Vladivostok. From there, they would be sent by third-party ships through Korea's East Sea, around the current port city, and onto Shanghai.

The staff meeting devised all the plans according to this principle. The limitation of 60 top officers and staff was to prevent complications caused by multiple commanders interfering in the process. This number was carefully chosen by the Nationalist government, prioritizing highly respected individuals. There was a chance of complaints, so the number was kept secret, and it was decided to send the troops out first.

Under the command of respective leaders, the troops headed south, leaving Tomsk. It would take about a month. I believe there were six or seven generals of major rank or above inside the unit. Below them were staff officers of division and brigade level, with regimental commanders and other officers leaving with their units. The Russians handled all the transportation, so no one from our side could participate in the sending process. The farewell words were simply, "Let's meet again in Nanjing, China."

But the gods of fate had already decided it then. Most of those four people faced death, and there was no chance to meet again.

Nearly 70,000 troops who set out for Xinjiang were stuck there. It was because of Sheng Shicai, the governor of Xinjiang at the time. Back then, Xinjiang had no railroads; the only transportation was a small plane operated by a newly opened airline, Guyar (Lo). But even that plane only flew as far as Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang. It flew just twice a month, and its transport capacity was inferior even to the U.S. twin-engine C-46 planes — it was a German Winkers passenger plane.

The other means of transport were overland — horses and camels were the only options, and they were barely sufficient. But moving tens of thousands of troops across thousands of miles by land was impossible. On top of that, Sheng Shicai was a ruthless man who exercised Russian diplomatic influence to block Xinjiang. Xinjiang became a forbidden territory.

Even if Sheng Shicai had allowed tens of thousands of troops to pass, reaching the Central Plains would not have been a simple march, and the transportation costs would have been enormous. Every time Sheng Shicai expanded his power, he faced a shortage of troops. Tens of thousands of soldiers had been disarmed in Russia, but Sheng handed over power to the Russians to bring in weapons. Only manpower was lacking. Since people had entered Xinjiang, they were not going to let them go. It was like catching a tiger that flew into their hands. That's why these people and their families faced a fate of separation and death. Caught in Sheng's grip, they either sacrificed themselves fighting the anti-Japanese war or disappeared amidst the ethnic strife of the Kuomintang-Communist alliance, or they spent their whole lives in exile.

Afterward, Sheng became a dictator beyond even the Russian Communist Party. Anyone not loyal to him was annihilated. His power expanded greatly. He acted as a provincial governor in China but on the outside, he ruled like a monarch and built the Sheng Shicai kingdom. Though he initially defied the Communist Party and refused orders from the National Government, even attempting a coup, he eventually changed his stance. When the Communists occupied their homeland, he was under Chiang Kai-shek's leadership in Taiwan, who spared his life because Sheng had changed his attitude. He died two years ago.

Among those involved was a man named Nam Kyung-woo, who accompanied me when I led the revolutionary corps in Manchuria. His story appears in the book *Jung Hee-rok*. When I became an adjutant to General Ma Jeom-san, Nam Kyung-woo expressed his wish to serve as a soldier under me and was assigned to one of General Ma's units. He went to Xinjiang and was reportedly killed not by Sheng Shicai himself but by one of Sheng's subordinates after speaking carelessly. Besides him, four or five other young Koreans who served under Ma Jeom-san and So Byung-moon also lost their lives in Xinjiang.

These blood-pouring young men who vowed to make Korea independent left their blood on the Tian Shan and Altai mountains of China and the remote corners of the Gobi Desert.

Later, at the urging of Russia, we were soon sent into exile — thousands of us. Maria and her party were also part of this group. Though it was only a short time, we said farewell in Tomsk.

Traveling on a third-country ship across the Sea of Japan was not dangerous, but the lonely road could not help but feel even lonelier. Maria's body had not fully recovered, she had no money beyond the clothes she wore, and having lived relying only on our group, she felt many anxieties about the Chinese language. When I met her later in China, she told me this.

The others — Ma Jeom-san, So Byung-moon, Lee Kyu, Wang Deok-rim, General Gong Hye-young, and the rest — totaled 52. Excluding the five key commanders, there were 47 of us. As one of those 47, I departed for Moscow.

Arriving in Tomsk, I spent eight months there. I can't recall the exact dates. The train we boarded was not a rickety old train, but one so luxurious that I was amazed there could be such a train in Russia. The cars were two fully first-class coaches. We arrived in Moscow a few days later. For several days, we lived a life of luxury on that train, but we couldn't control the equipment inside, which led to many funny stories. Those eight months in Tomsk felt like a world apart.

When we arrived at the Moscow station, a diplomat, Dr. An, got on the train. He was a large man, taller than most, with white hair and glasses. Seeing him, I felt as if I were meeting a divine incarnation or a symbol of God. It was as if I had met the Savior.

On the train, a meeting was held under the leadership of General Ma. We were told, in the name of the Chinese Military Affairs Committee (Chairman: Chiang Kai-shek), that our suffering in Russia was recognized by the National Government and that we were hailed as heroes of a five hundred million strong nation. We were also ordered to form a provisional military police unit of 52 members under General Ma's command. Our mission was to inspect all European military facilities and policies for about ten years following World War I.

As the train crossed the Vistula River and entered the Polish border, from the west, I was overwhelmed by despair, sadness, anger, and confusion, as if I had fallen into a deep hell. Others grew more joyful and excited, eager to learn more. I was moved too, but in a different way. I wrote about this story in detail in my *Volga Homeland* memoir.

When our group finally returned to Nanjing, the seat of the National Government, we came to fully realize Russia's treacherous and shameless behavior.

During negotiations with our National Government's representative, Ambassador An, the Russians stubbornly refused to return our weapons, outright swallowing up the demand. What's worse, they charged us steeply for the food they had provided us during those eight months.

We lived as prisoners without being prisoners. On top of that, nearly 70,000 soldiers faced unimaginable hardships. The troops sent to Xinjiang carried not a single firearm; they went entirely unarmed. Although we suffered harsh abuse and lived in miserable conditions in Russia, the amount the National Government paid for those eight months in Tomsk—for those 70,000 troops who fought anti-Japanese guerrilla warfare in Manchuria—was equivalent to the cost of keeping 70,000 people in the finest hotels in any European country for eight months.

Given the Chinese ethnic makeup and historical background, the National Government naturally treated the Manchurian resistance fighters with respect. They surely felt a strong responsibility to quickly bring them back to China by any means. This issue could have been resolved long ago, but the Russians deliberately delayed the timeline to extract more money. Moreover, the accounting was filled with all sorts of items that had nothing to do with us. Though I never knew the exact numbers since I was far from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, it must have been millions or tens of millions of dollars. The Russians were utterly despicable.

This stands in stark contrast to the early days of the Russian Revolution, when Russia begged oppressed peoples and small nations worldwide for cooperation by promising that supporting the revolution would lead to future liberation, freedom, and equality. Now, these same people brag that Russia invaded yet "liberated," looted yet "helped." My eight months in Tomsk ended with the harsh realization of what Russia truly is and what communism really means.

6. Nostalgia for the Volga

In the dead of winter, 1933, under General Ma Zhongshan's command, I had to endure what was almost prisoner-of-war life for eight long months, along with about 70,000 Chinese troops. The Chinese National Government had An Hye-kyung, who passed away in 1970 and served several times as foreign minister, dispatch Dr. Park as a special envoy to Moscow. He negotiated with the Russian authorities for our repatriation.

As a result of these talks, an agreement was reached: all the expenses that China had covered during our stay in Russia would be accounted for, and Russia would provide transport assistance. Finally, through various routes, we were able to return to Chinese soil.

We traveled through Kazakhstan, passing through Tacheng in Xinjiang Province—the same place where the Chinese Communist Party is now developing nuclear weapons—then moved through Xinjiang itself, and our troops returned to China's interior.

Meanwhile, the wives and children of soldiers boarded the Trans-Siberian Railway in the opposite direction, heading back to Vladivostok. From there, they planned to take a ship belonging to the Third Shipping Company—an independent organization at war with Japan—and sail to Shanghai.

As for the senior officers, including General Ma Zhongshan, Lee Kyu, So Byeongmun, Wang Deokrim, Gong Hyeyoung, and his staff—a total of 52 people—they were assigned by the Chinese National Government's Military Affairs Commission to a European Military Observation Unit to monitor military developments in various European countries and then return.

So I became a member of that European Military Observation Unit and traveled back to Shanghai via Germany and Italy.

The delegation, led by the hero of the Chinese Nationalist Air Force, General Ma, departed from Russia and passed through Poland, which had only recently regained its independence after World War I, before arriving in Germany. Seeing Poland deeply moved me. There was nothing about it I didn't envy. When I thought of Korea, chained under Japanese iron rule, Poland's independence ignited a new fire in my heart. It was an endless envy.

I swallowed tears quietly and entered Germany. There were many Chinese expatriates everywhere, including in Berlin. When the Chinese in Berlin heard about our arrival, they gathered and held a grand welcoming ceremony. General Ma and the other members of the observation unit must have been overwhelmed with emotion, but I was an exception. The shock I alone felt was enormous. At the welcoming banquet, while the rest of the delegation expressed their feelings, I was overcome with sorrow. Captivated by envy and longing, I quietly asked some of the Chinese residents, "Are there any Korean students studying in Berlin?"

The Chinese student representative, named Je, replied, "Yes, there are. About ten or so." He introduced me to one named Myung—though that's not his real name, I prefer not to reveal his true identity, so I just call him Myung.

At a teahouse called Su Dong Bu in Berlin, Myung and I wandered the streets at night, trying to untangle the complex emotions stirred in me by my experiences in Russia. This piece recounts those memories.

I want to clarify that this story was originally written during the Chinese War of Resistance against Japan to raise awareness among the Chinese about our nationalism and consciousness, and to seek their support for our independence. It was published alongside another work, written in Chinese vernacular, and was corrected by a young Chinese writer friend named Bian Neibu. The untitled manuscript became known as "Rosy Age," his debut work.

This original manuscript entered our country and was first translated the year after liberation by Song Ji-young. Song changed the title to "Fragrance of the Volga." It had already been serialized in domestic and international newspapers and released as a standalone book (in 1950), so some people may have already read it. I have now revised the original and retained the title "Fragrance of the Volga," which I think is fitting.

A June night in Berlin. The neon lights, flickering like colored snakes, covered the city with waves of pink, purple, orange, blue, cobalt, and red. Letters flashing in these colors shimmered like a romantic silver glow, softly flowing from a nearby coffee house, where a soft and beautiful serenade, sonata, and concerto spilled out. The coffee house, with a bright white storefront as luminous as midday, had revolving doors that swallowed one crowd of patrons and spit out another.

Among the flowing stream of people were Nazi armbands, black trench coats, and brown Nazi uniforms, all blending into the crowd. This street was the proud and wide heart of Europe, buzzing with the clamor of 203 streetcars.

A wounded veteran wearing a black armband walked quietly down the street, holding a dog's leash. The trees along the sidewalk trembled in the wind. A singer's voice rose, filled with bitterness, and the low bass of a double bass echoed through the empty spots on the street, filling the space with sadness and resentment. The sounds carried countless feelings.

Street vendors hurried about as the crowd bustled. The smell of alcohol permeated the corner taverns—it was a scent like a sweet perfume then. At every corner, prostitutes disguised with thick makeup threw flirtatious glances at passersby. Cheap perfume added to their allure, making their painted lips seem all the more vivid.

They twisted their waists sinuously like eels, whispering sensual words to pedestrians, their voices filled with a kind of lust so disturbing it seemed to threaten to swallow all male passion. They looked as if they could hand out chunks of flesh to anyone passing by.

Suddenly, at the Saratov train station, the rails seemed to vibrate and cheers erupted. On this June night, amid the wind and rain, the Nazi rally's Nietzschean cries burst forth loudly. The booming shouts echoed around the Gothic church's spire, which pierced the summer night sky like a spear.

Groups of soldiers marched past the dilapidated parliamentary building, their gleaming helmets throwing countless reflections. The sound of motors from distant factories resembled the noisy din of wartime sirens.

On this June night, deepened by dark beer, the neon-lit city displayed the light of the Nazi empire's hatred, confusing the melancholy German people.

When Myung and I escaped from the Korean expatriate welcome party—overflowing with excitement and joy—after having consumed more than half a dozen pints of dark beer and champagne, it was already past nine at night. The alcohol buzz was fully coursing through my body. My blood was spinning uncontrollably like a water mill.

My heart felt as if one side was ablaze, but my consciousness was sharp.

Just an hour ago, the warm conversation and kind voices of a certain country's people soothed us deeply and embraced us gently—this I clearly remember. Sharing the voices of hearts that sought justice together with those who were going through the same fate was easy, and this silent dialogue allowed us to communicate heart to heart. The sound of those hearts made me feel as if I were returning to the homeland where pure and sacred spring water flows. The fields of the homeland where azaleas bloom and wither, the country of the beautiful blue hibiscus for which words fall short, the Park Yeon Falls still pouring before my eyes, the drooping yellow willows... All of these evoked an indescribable emotion as I kept swallowing black beer. One bottle, then another... No matter how much I drank, it was as if I was drinking plain water—that's how it felt.

When I left Tomsk in Russia, passed through Poland, and finally reached Berlin, the capital of Germany, the Germans who had fought to survive under the chains imposed by the Treaty of Versailles welcomed us with heartfelt passion. It was not just a simple ceremony welcoming warriors who had braved the harsh northern snowstorms, but rather, it was a sincere reception of brothers who had lived together through fierce storms, full of various kinds of enthusiasm and excitement. Among them, to my great surprise, I met a comrade named Myung who was teaching philosophy at Berlin University. Myung was the kind of person who, if described as a dedicated philosopher, had read an article about me in a Japanese newspaper over ten years ago, saying I was a revolutionary who got injured for the cause.

Meeting Myung for the first time in a foreign land so far away was so moving that from the very moment we met, we became close quickly. The emotions we shared were so intense they made our bodies tremble with awe. Myung, now the central figure of admiration and excitement, soon called about ten Korean students and comrades living in Berlin, introducing me as a Korean revolutionary who participated in the "September 18 Incident" (the Manchurian Incident described by the Japanese), and immediately gathered them to hold a welcome party that very night. The atmosphere quickly changed with the fragrant incense, and the banquet went on amid fiery passion and bitter sorrow.

At that time, I said something—not a speech, but a choked cry. It revived the shocking emotion I felt when crossing from Russia into Poland by train, remembering the young Polish soldier standing firmly at the border, holding his posture with determination. "I will never forget the Polish children running freely under the sun. I cannot forget the free fields of Poland, the free sun of Poland. And I believe I will forever cherish the memories of the newly reborn Warsaw. Everything in Warsaw was filled with newness. Every flower, every blade of grass, every stone and tree in Warsaw smiled at me, reproaching me gently, saying, 'Warsaw is new… Are you not living as a slave in Tokyo? You slaves! Have you seen it?'" Warsaw was like a phoenix rising from the burnt ruins. It lifted its proud head and wagged its tail, scolding me.

"We are a nation that has endured fate, being pierced here and there three times… We are a people who have survived that experience… So how can we live such a miserable life today? What are the descendants of Dangun doing? Until this moment, how long have we shed blood to plant our Taegukgi flag high in Hanyang? I have seen it. How many tears have been shed? I have cried too. Yes, we must plant the Taegukgi flag in Hanyang once again."

My passionate words poured out like a bursting dam.

"Yes. Today, we do not have a country. We have no homeland. We have lost the Daedong River and the Geumgang Mountains. The willows by the Nodulgang River and Park Yeon Falls are no longer ours. All we have are iron bars… death. We are rotting, wilting, and falling ill. Like homeless puppies and chicks, we are driven out, leaving behind our beautiful rivers and mountains, wandering in South and North Manchuria, Siberia, and Europe. Drifting along, we carry the sorrowful melody of Arirang. Arirang! Ah, how sad Arirang is... But we must return. We must return to the homeland where the azaleas bloom and wither beautifully. We must return to our pure spring water, our homeland. Let us kiss the soil soaked with the blood and tears of our ancestors. Let us kiss that soil once more… once again!"

I had to hold myself back for a moment because of the tears. Then I briefly told about the remaining revolutionary comrades still in China.

“Everyone, let’s go forward and fight. We must die. Everyone must embrace suffering. We must accept suffering. Only through death and suffering can we be reborn. Either the Japanese imperialists perish completely, or all thirty million descendants of Dangun perish… There is no other way.”

My voice was hoarse, and my throat was choked up. The comrades who shared the moment with me all mixed tears into their drinks. When I raised my glass for a sip, they wildly raised theirs in return. There was no time to think further. Everything was only a stimulus, and fragments of despair spilled before my eyes. Despair! Since the day I left Tomsk, despair had never left me. Even when a grand welcome was held at the Nangin Hotel in Konstanz (Konstanz trading post), where Chinese people living in Germany enthusiastically praised our anti-Japanese generals and applauded thunderously, everything sounded like sharp ridicule to me.

“Why was I born a Korean? Because I was born in Korea, right? Then why was I born a Korean...?” Pushing away the night inside my mind, I shut the door and, biting my lip, harshly tormented myself. It was an effort to shake off the agony, but the more I did, the more it clung to me.

Walking the streets of Berlin, I was unable to enjoy the foreign scenery or the foreign night view because those thoughts clung to my heels like glue. I purposely made loud footsteps as if to shake everything off, walking step by step. If anyone had shown me even slight contempt, I would have drawn my knife instantly. The streets I walked were neither Frederick the Great’s royal capital nor Bismarck’s domain, nor the capital of the Nazi Empire threatening the world. The streets I saw looked like a rough wilderness, harsher than the Gobi Desert. I wanted to just pass through without looking at anything.

“Now, where shall we go?” Myung suddenly stopped in front of the famous palace of Frederick the Great and asked.

“Where are we going now?”
“Let’s go anywhere. Let’s walk until we are tired.”
That was all I could say. But I also couldn’t stop.
“No, it’s already...” Myung looked at his watch. “It’s 10:40...” Then he looked at me.
“Let’s find a place to sit down for a bit. Tonight, I’ll take care of you properly...”
“What care? If anyone is to take care, it should be me tonight.”
“On the contrary, me... haha, what’s that about?”
“Do you want me to tell you why?”
I told Myung about what happened that morning. At the shooting range, I fired ten shots and scored 94 points (there are ten targets; the center is 10 points, decreasing by one point as you move outward). The Germans there were surprised, saying, “Look, Major Ma, they say you are a renowned anti-Japanese general, and your subordinate is just as excellent!” This news eventually reached General Ma, who was so delighted that he immediately gave me 50 dollars. Then he encouraged me and said as a keepsake, I should buy a Warsaw-type revolver.

“Isn’t it only natural for me to treat you well?”
“Wow, that’s amazing. For that reason, I wouldn’t mind being treated, but there’s one thing—you have to admit that I’m the owner here.”
He didn’t want to give in. Then, smiling, he asked again,
“Whoever is the owner, let’s not argue about that. If you’re going to visit a government office, where would you want to go?”
“Are there not any wandering ethnic people living nearby? Tonight I want to sit with such people.”
“Alright, then let’s go together.”
“Don’t question anything, just follow me.”

We crossed the street and then another, eventually entering a wide asphalt road outside Berlin’s city limits.
“This is where the white Russians living in Berlin gather...”
After a long silence, Myeong finally spoke. I lifted my head and glanced at several shops, feeling a bit excited. Was this not the area where the White Russian bars were clustered? Despite passing many places, I hesitated to go in. Even just by the decorations visible from outside, some mysterious connection seemed to tie my soul to the bars. Passing one or two places, I started to feel somewhat disappointed.

In that similar disappointment, I walked on, then suddenly lifted my head. My gaze caught a large, dazzling sign on a certain building. Right where I was standing stood a magnificent bar. The entrance was decorated with large walls made of milky white glass neon lights arranged squarely. On the cloudy glass was a painted color mural.

In the painting was a jade-colored sky, under which was a silver-colored polar iceberg. On the iceberg sat a white bear, bowing its head, staring out at the deep blue sea. Behind the bear, far off on the distant horizon of the Arctic Ocean, the aurora borealis shone with radiant neon colors that shimmered like moving electric currents.

Above, in stylized Russian letters, was written “White Bear Bar.”
This Arctic Ocean color painting was like a compass needle, leading me, and my feet felt stuck to the ground—I couldn’t move. I simply could not pass this place by. I was frozen in place.

Inside, band music was playing. Standing there deep in thought for a while, I then entered without saying a word. Myeong just followed behind me.
Pushing the door open, a white-uniformed White Russian boy embroidered with silver thread welcomed us. On the recessed, specially decorated stage, about twenty White Russian musicians sat in three rows playing German pieces.

On either side of the bandstand were stands holding bottles of beer, vodka, milk, and a few kinds of dry snacks like crackers and cheese. Black rye bread was also visible. The guests sat on seats in the hall, and the round tables, painted pure white, looked as if floating peacefully on the sea.

Guests sat in twos or threes, drinking beer, chatting, or listening to music. The lighting inside the hall was partially obscured by a curtain, casting a soft glow, and the black-yellow walls glowed faintly, creating an indescribably warm and cozy atmosphere.

Two large oil paintings covered the walls on both sides of the stage. On the right side was a painting of the Arctic Ocean, similar to the one outside but much larger. On the left side was a blazing firelight painting showing a burning Moscow. Amidst the flames stood Napoleon wearing a triangular hat tilted to one side, looking gloomy but furious.

His arms were folded across his chest, his belly sticking out, one hand resting under his chin, his eyes narrowed, staring furiously at Moscow. On Napoleon's face in the firelight was a strange expression of deep dark disillusionment.

"This must be a famous Russian painting, a depiction of Moscow's fiery fate!" I wondered where to sit to get the best view of these two paintings. I hesitated for a long time. The boy motioned several times, trying to guide me, but I stood there dazed. Finally, I took a seat under the Arctic Ocean painting.

The hall was filled with a distinct charm. The sharp smell of Northern European cigars, the scent of paper cigarettes, a gentle natural fragrance, the smell from a woman's hair, the perfume from a handkerchief tucked in a breast pocket—all mixed with the smell of ink, tobacco, coffee, and various foods, filling the room with rich aroma.

Amid these scents, the melodic accordion and lively lyre blended with the orchestra's music, creating an even stronger seductive atmosphere that swirled through the hall.

Myeong ordered two mugs of draft beer from the boy in fluent German. The boy carefully placed a large cup filled with dark beer topped with white frothy foam in front of us.

At that moment, I suddenly uttered a familiar Russian phrase that startled the White Russian wanderers:
"У вас есть водка, пожалуйста?" (Do you have vodka at your place?)

It was an extremely rare occurrence, like seeing a comet in broad daylight, to hear a yellow-skinned person appear here so late at night speaking perfect Russian. Since the two of us entered and began walking around the hall, all the guests' eyes were drawn toward us at once. Their neat Western-style suits, slicked-back hair, short mustaches, and broad shoulders gave them a distinctive look.

Now that a precisely accurate Russian phrase was slipping out of my mouth, all the guests stopped their conversations and turned their curious gaze toward me, the yellow-skinned person with slicked-back hair.

The stout, fair-skinned Russian innkeeper who had been wandering this station for a long time suddenly rose from behind the counter. He didn't rush toward the native tongue but hurried over to my side, pushing away the servants and bending slightly at the waist. In a somewhat awkward

voice, he said,
“I’m sorry. What can I get for you? What kind of drink would you like...?”

He muttered to himself in Russian,
“It’s really hard to find someone who speaks Russian around here.”

In the stout man’s blue eyes suddenly appeared a sad light, like a wide fog. He had managed this hall for over ten years, but this night was the first time he heard the familiar hometown dialect of Russia from a yellow-skinned person’s mouth. He even said he could smell the earth of his beloved homeland.

Myeong-i, watching the innkeeper’s hesitant behavior, explained to me in German,
“This man lived in Russia for a long time. That’s why he speaks Russian so well.”

“Have you been in Russia?” The stout innkeeper muttered several times, then, as if struck hard across the face, instinctively stepped back a pace. His blue eyes rolled for several minutes, fixing a sharp gaze on my middle head.

“All right, I understand. You are one of the group who came with General Majon. You just arrived from Russia the other day, right? Yes? I read about you all in the newspaper a few days ago and then more detailed news this afternoon. I read every single word, without missing anything.”

As he spoke, the stout innkeeper trembled slightly, and his face turned so pale it was almost frightening. It must have been the painful thoughts flooding his mind. After such a long time estranged from the homeland called Korea and Russia, it was only natural he should feel this way, smelling the scent of Russia again after so many years.

But just recently, there had been travelers from Russia passing through here. However, they had disregarded this stout innkeeper. Moreover, since the Nazi emperor took power two or three years ago, a high iron curtain has been drawn between Berlin and Moscow, completely severing everything.

Myeong placed a beer in front of him, then cut in with a clipped voice,
“That’s right. This man is a senior aide to General Majon and recently returned from the homeland.”

Myeong’s single remark acted like a signal for the somber moment to deepen. The string music, which had been softly playing, abruptly ceased. The eyes of the 20 or so Slavic men, filled with passionate emotions, simultaneously locked onto my tightly shaven head, as if by silent agreement.

In a blink, the hall was plunged into a deathly stillness, strange and profound. Everyone was tense; even their breathing was audible. No one dared break the silence. It was as if they feared some great force might be destroyed. The tension and quiet pressed down like a heavy weight.

Tears welled up in my eyes. Blood rushed through my face, and I could only stand up, unable to sit still.

Then, unable to hold back any longer, I burst out,
"Yes, I have come from your homeland, your motherland—Russia. I feel it is my duty to bring you the latest news from your country."

The word "motherland" rang out like a booming bell in their ears. The sound echoed off the walls, growing larger and deeper, clinging like frost and endlessly resonating.

Suddenly, as if shaken by this bell, the musicians on the stage stood in unison. Even the German guests in the hall, caught up in the mood, rose and swayed in unison. Their faces showed a solemn respect. The 20 or so musicians stood silently with their instruments, statuesque in their solemnity.

Their firm, smooth physiques resembled sturdy honey locust trees. Their broad chests and muscular arms, covered with thick hair beneath embroidered sleeves, appeared even more robust next to the shining silver strings of violins and mandolins. These strong arms seemed less the product of blood and flesh alone, but born from blood, tears, and sorrow.

Like a cold autumn night's stream flowing mournfully under the moonlight, they played music soaked with grief—their faces marked with scars left from their past. These men were once cannon fodder and knights of the Romanov empire, forced to flee the black soil of Russia after fighting through the flames of the October Revolution.

From then on, they were forever doomed to wander under this foreign sky—a first glimpse into a life of hopelessness, where they sold horses for drink, sold daughters for drink, even sold their beloved wives for drink.

Deeply submerged in alcohol, whether night or day, regardless of whether the sky fell or the earth split—always drink, drink! This was the life of these exiles.

Yet even then, traces of suffering lingered on their refined faces. The unbearable hardship of life, its endless struggles, left no signs of fierce rebellion, but their dark eyes hid an incomprehensible sorrow and gloom.

Their expressions were clearly twisted by the overwhelming pain they had endured, sometimes looking foolish or numb, as if under a spell.

Seeing their grim faces and trembling arms in turn stirred a storm of emotion in me. At that moment, a mysterious and fiery light surged through my body like a flame. The heavy burden of sorrow I had carried throughout my life suddenly melted away like snow on a high mountain.

A large stone seemed to block my throat, preventing me from speaking, no matter how much I wanted to. Silence continued. My two streams of tears lengthened the silence, wetting the white tablecloth.

Overwhelmed, I did not know what to do for a long time, but finally my lips moved, releasing a voice. It was not a sound of flesh but of spirit. I was certain it was not a voice of reason. It was as if some force rising from the deepest waters spoke through me.

“Tonight, please do not ask me any opinions about Imperial Russia or the Soviet Union. Do not ask me about morality or social issues. Do not ask me to criticize or reproach anything. And please, do not ask why you had to sell your wives and children just to drink. Life itself is inherently painful, unknowable. Among us, all theories have died. What remains is only the pure, deep, and abiding sympathy between one human and another.”

My voice had risen without me realizing it, turning into a commanding order.
“Ask me. Ask whatever you want about the situation in our homeland. I will answer your questions with all my sincerity. I know that in your lifetime, you will never again have the chance to embrace Russia’s arms.”

The fat landlord traced a cross on his chest with trembling hands.
“… Yes, even if it’s God’s will, we will never again see the soil of our native land. We know it has come to this.”

The Russian officers and their men took out their handkerchiefs, carefully folding and unfolding them, their eyes constantly tearing up.
Each time they took out a handkerchief, their eyes grew wetter and more swollen. Yet, not a single person made a sound.

A silent, intense passion stirred like an ancient flame, smoldering as if for a thousand years.

The smell of cigars and coffee was thick in the air, detectable by the deep breaths they took.

Every person’s expression was different, yet all were filled with deep emotion — or rather, I could feel the feelings inside their hearts as if I had entered their souls.

It was like a polar bear standing atop an iceberg in a mural, twitching its ears as if eavesdropping on a silent secret. It seemed to be observing those gathered there.

It was like seeing Napoleon, wearing his iconic bicorne hat tilted at an angle, standing in the flames of Boskabar, watching the arms of the white Russian officers intently.

Then a voice came through, like a wind slipping through the mountains — the voice of Russia, the voice of the black earth, and the desperate courage of the white Russian exiles in the room that night.

Every word came out broken, as if restrained by the deepest humility hidden in their hearts.

“Sir! Has the snow in Tomsk melted away?”
“Sir! Has green grass sprouted on the outskirts of Moscow?”
“Sir! Is the snow still lying thick on the Polish borderlands?”

“Sir! Do our people’s faces still carry the same tired, worn look?”
“Sir! Does the government still say that the rations are never enough?”
“Sir! Has the ice on the Volga River thawed yet?”
“Sir! Have the children of our homeland survived through the winter?”
“Sir! Are there still many flower-selling girls in the busy markets of Moscow as before?”

I couldn’t answer a single question. Each one stabbed at my heart like a sharp blade.

I clenched my teeth and endured it all. Finally, I could no longer hold back, and with all my strength I let out a hoarse cry.

Because every single one of those questions was exactly what I wanted to ask my fellow countrymen.

“Please! I beg you, don’t say another word...”

I couldn’t answer a single word. Each question pierced my eyes like a sharp stab.

I clenched my teeth and endured it, but in the end, I couldn’t hold back any longer. With all my strength, I let out a sudden, loud shout.

Each one of those questions was exactly what I had wanted to ask any one of my fellow countrymen.

“Please! I beg you, don’t say another word…”

But my voice, choked with tears, quickly silenced them like a heavy hand pressing down.

I barely managed a reply to their stunned silence. Then, clenching my fist tightly, as if steeling myself for something great, I stepped forward and shouted:

“Alright, that’s enough for now… Let’s just drink to our heart’s content! I’ll treat you all to vodka — how about that? Vodka! Let’s drink our vodka and forget everything… just forget it all…”

Vodka made in Germany was a rare and prized luxury in Berlin, more expensive than most other spirits. I ordered thirty-some bottles of premium American vodka all at once and handed them out, bottle by bottle, to every Russian there — from the chubby bar owner and his clerk to the doormen.

I knew well that serving vodka to officers of the Romanov dynasty’s military was a supreme sign of respect.

Indeed, my actions overwhelmed them. The bar suddenly buzzed with excitement as the chubby owner, moved by the gesture, offered smoked salmon snacks. The salmon looked like it had been

dried by smoke or perhaps grilled — the best possible accompaniment to vodka. He handed out a piece of salmon to each person.

True to form, the bottles of vodka started to circulate.

As soon as a bottle was brought to me, I snapped off the seal, gripped the bottle, and shook it up and down a couple of times. When the gas inside hissed, I struck the bottom sharply with my palm, just right so that the cork popped out cleanly.

It wasn't easy, but I was practiced at it. With flair, I pulled the cork out, put the bottle to my lips, puffed my chest like a proud warrior, spread my legs, tilted my head back, and took a deep, steady gulp.

I drank nearly half the bottle at once, then wiped the mouth of the bottle with my palm and set it on the table.

I mimicked the exact motion Cossack soldiers use when drinking vodka, with no awkwardness at all. Striking the bottom of the bottle to pop the cork is a simple trick, but it requires real skill and style.

Too soft a tap, and the cork won't budge; too hard, and the cork flies off with a bang — often spilling the precious vodka everywhere.

Watching me do it with perfect control, even the white Russians, many of them Cossack descendants, stared at me in stunned silence, clearly impressed.

As the golden vodka wet their lips, their blue eyes grew wide and glistened as if holding back tears.

I will never forget that faint, sweet memory — the sparkling youth when life's brightest flowers bloomed, the night of the dance party in the village where my heart raced as I danced the waltz with a young woman I had long loved.

The accordion's enchanting music lifted our spirits, matching the rhythm of the dance. The warmth and softness of that moment, so sweet and tender…

That dance of love was the most beautiful and captivating thing. At every step, we embraced and kissed.

The lovers twirled in time to the beat, their slender bodies moving like lotus leaves swaying in a summer breeze.

The rhythm carried the dancers like a gentle wind through the fields at night.

When the eyes of young love met, a kiss followed. Then they pulled apart, only to come together again as their eyes met once more — and another kiss bloomed.

The shy lovers couldn't help but sing softly after the kiss.

"Hey, my love, you're the only one for me…"

And with that came more kisses, and the song went on…

"Hey, my love, how much I burn for you…"

Is that all? Unfading memories are endless.

On a night when white snow falls thick and fast, a young Cossack gallops through the snowy road.

The papakha—a tall, fuzzy fur hat worn by Russian Cossack cavalry—wobbles atop his head, swaying with the horse's movements. (Usually, civilians wear a shorter papakha made from goat hair, but nowadays they're popular even in the U.S. and France, especially among women.)

Tilted about 30 degrees, the papakha flutters as he rides. Over his thick duslik—a traditional coat made of coarse fabric filled with cotton—the snowflakes settle lightly like soft down feathers. Yet the young rider presses on, undeterred.

His double-breasted chest buttons and collar are turned sharply outward like blades. The duslik's length flows far below his suit jacket, fluttering in rhythm with his youth and grace.

In the distance, the evening bells of the cathedral ring out, cutting through the snowy night's silence, enhancing the quiet atmosphere.

As he rides through the snow, a soft, playful whistle and a hum alternate in the chilly air.

The song spreads beneath the silver sky, lingering in the ears long after the bells have faded—an echo of a tune that stays with you.

The song went like this:

"Love that breaks the earth,
Love that makes the heart race,
The path of love is a road within a dream…"

When such a song spills across the snowy plain in time with the horse's hooves, a small village appears, nestled quietly in the distance. Peaceful homes, and beneath one window, a young woman waits. Draped elegantly in a finely wrinkled skirt, she tends a fire blazing in the hearth, adding branches from the root wood she's gathered.

On the table nearby, a pot of black tea steams gently, filling the room with warmth.

The light clip-clop of hooves grows louder, drawing nearer past the empty streets until shadows fall against the tightly shut glass window.

The woman's delicate hands tremble as she recalls how cold the snowstorm was, how it once chilled her to the bone when bringing wood inside. That ache of memory—this longing—belongs to everyone. It is the beautiful thought resting in youth's quiet dreams.

I stirred again the old dream, long dormant within the fold of memories.

At that moment, the scene unfolded.

Inside the hall, the German guests sat stunned by the excitement of the Russians, as if watching a spellbinding play without blinking—an impromptu, raw drama. More than thirty bottles of vodka sat emptied on the tables.

A robust friend who led the orchestra approached me, bowing slightly at the waist.

"On behalf of the entire orchestra, I offer my deepest respect for your generous hospitality, sir."

He took a long breath and continued:

"We do not know how to properly express our gratitude to you, sir. You say you lived in Russia… perhaps you like Russian music?"

My tongue was thick with alcohol, struggling to form words. With a trembling voice, I pointed to a glowing mural of Moscow on the left wall and said:

"Ah! Posa r, Mos ko—ski!"

They understood immediately. The musicians shouted in unison. "Posa r Mos koski!"

It was Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*—one of Russia's great masterpieces and also a favorite piece of this orchestra.

The conductor bowed again and rose to the podium.

As he adjusted the pitch, various instruments burst into short, scattered sounds. Then, with a sweeping flick of the baton, a flood of notes erupted like a torrent, transforming into a mighty river of sound that engulfed everything.

The rushing waves of melody overflowed like the waters beneath the Golden Pavilion, like the grand sails on Venice's rivers. The music's current stretched wide and vast like the sea itself.

Within the flow were cheerful waves, gloomy waves, unpleasant waves, and melancholy waves —rising and falling, swelling and breaking, sometimes crashing into countless ripples before surging again. The currents pushed and pulled endlessly.

Amid the intoxicating, almost mad symphony, the lively triangular Russian folk instrument called the balalaika sounded sharp and clear, its bright notes ringing out like drops of rain on clover leaves, rising urgently like a piano's melody.

Like the late autumn twilight breeze, the violin whispered soft, low notes filled with sadness and yearning, trembling like a delicate flame in the dusk.

The mandolin's fine, graceful tones gently pulled us into a quiet land of memories—turning the somber longing of an Indian monsoon or a Hawaiian summer night into sound.

The instruments rushed urgently in a thrilling symphony, painting a vivid scene.

The *1812 Overture* — a harsh, dry, tragic, and somber battlefield on Russian soil.

Under the victorious cries commanding the three armies, 520,000 soldiers crossed the River Niemen, advancing forward.

Cannons and artillery numbering over 1,200 rolled along, alongside 3,000 supply wagons and 4,000 carts carrying ammunition. The rapid galloping of 200,000 cavalry echoed with the sound of horses' hooves.

Together, these sounds blended, like thunder rolling across the earth.

The pounding hoofbeats poured down like heavy rain, mixed with the clanging of swords hanging from the cavalrymen's waists.

The fierce Battle of Vytemsk had just begun. Fighting raged in Smolensk as well. The Russian army was retreating, while the vast force of 520,000 kept pushing forward, advancing toward Moscow through the night.

Napoleon's proud figure moved with commanding force, as if entering the splendid Kremlin Palace. A majestic rhythm swelled and multiplied.

Fire!

Fire!

Moscow was aflame.

Flames leapt wildly over the splendid Moscow, wrapping the city in a furious red glow. The fire's light flickered like the restless hands of monkeys, shaking the blood in their veins. It was the dance of Spain, the pulse of jazz, the heat of ts. The sky was filled with crimson pillars of smoke and flame, turning everything into a sea of red. Amidst this blazing world, the hero of Corsica appeared, his triangular hat tilted at an angle, his face darkening with a grim expression. That somber look marked the turning point—music softened, the melody stretched thin. Violins, mandolins, and guitars sparked with bursts of fiery light.

The white bear bar was swallowed in the blaze. Moscow's fires consumed everything…

The fire laughed. It wailed.

The fire roared. It danced.

The fire swallowed all.

The fire dreamed. It struck. Fire! Fire! Fire! Endless flames consumed the scene as the battle of 520,000 soldiers raged on. They turned and fled, their sorrowful melodies trailing behind. The music faded into silence as the last notes hung in the air. Applause filled the empty space.

The conductor turned, bowed respectfully to me, and tapped the ground rhythmically with his handkerchief. Then he came back beside me.

"I want to play one more piece. Sir, what Russian music do you enjoy?"

"Volga Boat Song!" I replied.

At that, the conductor's expression darkened suddenly. "Volga Boat Song... Volga Boat Song…" he murmured in a daze, moving slowly toward the stage, head bowed, lost in thought.

A shadow fell—the black conductor's baton trembled as it flicked through the air. This was no grand blaze like before. It was slow, mournful, the melancholic wail and yearning nostalgia of the Volga River.

The proud flow of water, the song of boats drifting with the current, the cracking ice in winter, the thawing ice in spring—all poured out like a painted stream from the strings of the guzheng. Beneath the dreamlike ripples flowed the sorrow of Russia's black soil, the scent of the vast wild grasslands by the river, the ancient stillness beneath Siberia's primordial skies. Mixed in were the faint cries of 19th-century serfs.

When the piece ended, the string instruments faded and the boatmen appeared, their heads uncovered, their red chests exposed to the cold air. Strong men, rugged and weathered, slowly climbed up the steep banks of the Volga, carrying long heavy loads that dug into their shoulders.

The earth trembled beneath their heavy steps. Drops of sweat fell, soaking into the soil, but still they moved forward, slow and steady. Heads bowed, shoulders heaving, drawn forward by some invisible force. Centuries of suffering, hardship, and sorrow weighed on their backs as they pressed on through the long, endless line.

The music flowing from their stringed instruments revealed the deepest emotions of the players —raw, aching memories unmistakably alive in each note.

A simple, beautiful soul trembled like a fragile blossom in the gloom, softly fragile and mournful.

The musicians poured their whole being into this performance—their lifetime's sweat and tears shed silently in that moment.

The cello and violins, larger and deeper than usual, sang out in sorrowful laments, carrying the heavy sigh of a century's grief. Their faces grew more solemn; their lips finally quivered as the melody faded into silence.

It was the sound of strings mourning a century's worth of buried sorrow. Their faces gradually turned somber. At last, their lips began to move.

"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!
Heave-ho! Heave-ho!
Together now, heave-ho!
Heave-ho! Heave-ho!
Heave-ho! Heave-ho!"

With bent shoulders and ropes digging into their backs, they sang again through gritted teeth.
"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!
Heave-ho! Heave-ho!"

As if strung with beads of dew, their faces were soon streaked with tears.
"Heave-ho! Heave-ho!
Heave-ho! Heave-ho!
Starving guts, naked bodies—
Each song soaked in blood and sweat—heave-ho!
Heave-ho! Heave-ho!
Heave-ho... heave-ho...
Sing it loud, cry it out…"

A prayer to the Lord.
"Who will save us?"

When the song reached that line, both the singing and the music stopped all at once. The entire stage filled with sobs. Even the fat old owner of the bar clung to a table and wept.

That night, neither Nana nor Myung nor I could remember exactly how we parted ways with those wandering souls or how we ended up outside the bar. I had barely a dollar and a half left to my name.

I checked the time. It was 1:40 in the morning.
Lifting my head, I looked up at the sky. The stars above sparkled, as if they were peeking down at me.

Each and every one of them shimmered faintly, like the tear-filled eyes of wandering Russians.

7. General Ma Jeom-san

When General So Byung-moon was stationed at the western Zhizhen section of the Central Manchurian Railway, I happened to be relatively close to his base. At the time, I had entered Mongolia to prepare for a hunting trip. One day, out of the blue, General So's aide-de-camp came to me with a message saying that the General had been looking for me earnestly.

I was puzzled—how had he learned about me, and why did he want to meet me? At the time, there were disturbing rumors spreading among Koreans across Manchuria. It was said that he believed Koreans in Manchuria were collaborators with the Japanese and that he was capturing them. Hearing this troubled me deeply. But I also wondered if this might be an opportunity to help our compatriots, so I decided to meet him.

When we met, I was surprised to find that he already knew quite a bit about me—especially my past actions in the Battle of Cheongsanri and other related events. He explained that he had launched a righteous uprising and wanted my cooperation.

I saw this as an opportunity. I told him I would cooperate, of course, but I had one condition: he must drop the mistaken suspicion that Koreans along the western Zhizhen section of the Central Manchurian Railway were enemy collaborators, and once the fighting began, he must grant freedom to those already detained. In short, I was offering to cooperate in exchange for the safety and liberty of the Korean population along the railway. I made this request on the premise that I would take full responsibility with my own body as collateral.

General So agreed immediately, saying that from his perspective it was a reasonable and fair proposal. He admitted that he didn't know much about Koreans and that even among his staff, very few truly understood them. He had believed that no Koreans along the railway had been mistreated or deprived of their freedom, but he acknowledged my concerns and asked me to serve as his secretary.

My responsibilities included intelligence work and research on Japanese military movements, and I was also asked to make strategic recommendations. At that time, General Ma Zhanshan's former chief of staff, Sagara, and his assistant chief of staff, Kim Kyu-byuk, were both working to facilitate cooperation between Generals Ma and So. These two men arranged for me to be transferred to General Ma.

General Ma was operating in northern Heilongjiang province, in regions such as Youhua, Tongbei, and Cheollyeo. With General So's approval, I joined Ma's forces and was appointed operations officer after passing through the staff officer position.

It was during my time under General So's command that the Japanese army began its offensive. At that time, the Kwantung Army possessed armored trains originally owned by the Northeastern Chinese Army stationed in Mukden—five fully functional and two partially damaged trains. As

anti-Japanese volunteer armies rose across Manchuria and regular resistance forces began infiltrating the railway lines, the Japanese deployed these armored trains to various routes.

Only one such train was assigned to the western Zhizhen section where General So was positioned, but even that one inflicted devastating damage on the Chinese forces. Just like how tanks support infantry in the field, these armored trains served both as offense and mobile artillery. When moving, they protected advancing troops, and when stationary, they served as fortified positions.

Thanks to their overwhelming firepower and breaking force, they played a critical role in battles. As a result, the Chinese forces were forced to retreat from Holla-Erqi all the way to Zushan. A countermeasure was urgently needed.

After some thought, I noticed many American-style flatbed freight cars parked at the Chalan Tun station. That's when I came up with the idea to convert them into makeshift armored trains. I immediately implemented strict security measures, summoned all engineers, and mobilized every available resource. We brought the cars into the maintenance shed and worked through the nights.

In just one week, I had created a functional armored train—my own design.

I've always believed that the most important form of creativity in military operations is to create something from nothing and to effectively use substitutes when needed. Though I wasn't a trained engineer, military necessity drove me to build the train.

Inside the flatcars, I embedded short rail segments like stakes, reinforced them with thick planks, and created double walls filled with stones and sand to block bullets. On top of the cars, I laid more rails, piled sandbags up to about 1.6 meters, and carved gun ports all around so rifles and machine guns could fire freely. The locomotive was placed in the center of the train with 2 or 3 modified cars on either side. This central positioning helped protect it from direct hits, and the layout allowed for flexible movement.

I ensured the walls were double-layered with bricks and explosive-proof materials, packed with sand and stones. Despite all this, the interior was still spacious enough for soldiers to move around, thanks to the wide gauge of the Siberian Central Railway—the widest in the world. This allowed for such a large and wide car body.

After selecting infantry officers and training them in how to operate my creation, we used the armored train to launch a surprise attack against the Japanese at Udongbul and eventually retook Denzushan.

General Ma, upon hearing this news, rushed over from Qiqihar. Among the witnesses to the train's construction was Wang Chun-min, then the stationmaster at Ulimo, who survived the war and now lives in Taiwan. He later sent me a letter recalling those days, which I've included in this book.

This episode may remind some readers of the desert battles between Rommel and Montgomery in Tunisia, but our armored train left behind its own memorable stories. The Japanese, caught off guard by its sudden appearance, suffered serious setbacks.

Thanks to this improvised armored train, the western Zhizhen section of the Central Manchurian Railway managed to hold out for quite some time.

Since I've mentioned General Ma Zhanshan multiple times, I'll briefly introduce him and the context of his era for readers unfamiliar with him. General Ma is a national hero of the Chinese people and a historical figure.

To speak of General Ma is to begin with the Japanese militarists' invasion of Manchuria. On September 18, 1931, the Japanese army launched a full-scale military operation aimed at occupying Manchuria. They initiated a surprise attack and occupied Beidaying Garrison in Liaoning Province, which marked the beginning of the so-called "September 18 Incident."

But Japan's aggression didn't end with the occupation of Manchuria—it was only the beginning. They used Manchuria as a springboard for further invasions across the Chinese mainland. The war expanded not only throughout Asia but eventually engulfed the Pacific as well, resulting in the deaths of tens of millions of innocent people.

In the end, Japan destroyed itself, reduced its own homeland to ashes, and stood condemned by the free world and all humanity as a common enemy.

The aggressive imperial expansion of Japan traces back to the era of the Meiji Restoration in the early 19th century, when the nation imported Western science, culture, and imperialist ideology simultaneously.

By the 1820s, Japan, with ambitions to dominate a weakened Qing China, began fortifying its military and bolstering national strength. In 1895, Japan defeated China, and in 1905, it claimed victory over the Russian Empire.

Through those successive triumphs, it swallowed vast territories—Formosa (Taiwan) and the Pescadores Islands—and turned Korea into a protectorate. It also seized land, railway lines around Harbin–Changchun and Changchun–Dalian, and wrested half of Russia's influence in Manchuria under its control. Meanwhile, it expanded its influence in Qingdao and Jiaozhou in Germany's name following the Treaty of Versailles.

Flush with victory, Japanese militarism grew more aggressive, aiming to dominate all of Asia—culminating in the September 18, 1931 Manchuria incident, which was nothing short of reckless. Zhang Zuolin, the governor of Manchuria, resisted Japan's encroachments with astonishing tenacity, until Japanese terrorists bombed him at Hwanggu Station en route from Beiping (modern Beijing) to Laoning. Japan hoped the enraged troops under Zhang would retaliate against Japan, but Zhang's acting successor Wang Yong to effectively contained the situation, averting a broader conflict. The Manchuria incident might have been delayed by three years had it not been for Zhang's keen action.

Nevertheless, the Japanese Kwantung Army and General Staff, fearing international backlash and resistance from Chinese residents in Manchuria, decided to establish a puppet state. They installed former Qing Crown Prince Puyi as emperor, founding the state of "Manchukuo." Japan retained exclusive control over Manchukuo's military, foreign affairs, communication, and transportation. The puppet regime paid for its own police and diplomatic services.

Regional administration was divided among Japanese-appointed locals: Chi Tuang Lin in Jilin, Zhang Haifeng in Heilongjiang, Tang Yulin in Rehe, Liu Yizhang in Northern Gansu, and Zhang Jinghui in Harbin—all longstanding collaborators of the Kwantung Army. With this carefully orchestrated plan, they ignited the Manchuria Incident.

At that moment, Zhang Zuolin had left for his hometown. During his absence, his deputy governors opened the city gates to Japanese forces, and the core of Manchuria, including Beidaying, was seized with minimal resistance. This marked the successful execution of the September 18 Manchuria Incident.

Under the command of Kwantung Army leader General Harukazu Kawabe, Japanese troops advanced toward Heilongjiang Province by way of the East Chinese Eastern Railway. But they were met with fierce resistance at the Yalu River bridge, suffering a crushing defeat at the hands of Heilongjiang forces. During their dangerous retreat, they were ambushed by General O Jun-seung's famed cavalry and routed. Humiliated, the Kwantung commander committed suicide upon retreating to a remote willow grove by the lower Yalu River.

Fate's unpredictable mercy intervened: following a sudden Mongolian windstorm that blew through their shattered supply convoy, the Japanese were spared total annihilation. Had O Jun-seung's cavalry cut them off decisively, they could have seized Japanese troops as hostages, transforming a military embarrassment into a political victory. Instead, O Jun-seung pursued too eagerly, allowing the Japanese time to regroup.

The timing was disastrous—disasters compounded, forcing Japanese forces into retreat from Honghe to Chichihar and beyond. At that time, Ma Jeom-san stood as commander of the Fourth Army District and Governor of Heilongjiang. Realizing the collapse of the Japanese offensive, Ma proposed overtures to negotiate with the invaders. The Japanese, overconfident in their might, tentatively accepted and after two months of political maneuvering agreed on the following:

1. Ma Jeom-san would be appointed Minister of Military Affairs in the puppet Manchukuo government.
2. The Japanese army would advance only six months of military funding.
3. The Japanese would refrain from interfering in Heilongjiang's internal affairs.

These terms saved Ma's forces from annihilation, granted him substantial military resources, and bought time. A man of rare resolve and strategic thinking, Ma rapidly organized a network of patriotic commanders across Manchuria and moved critical military supplies and funds from Chichihar northward to cities like Daqing, setting the stage for a protracted anti-Japanese resistance.

I became Ma Jeom-san's aide after he relocated to Daqing. With Ma's second call to action, he gained support from academics, students, and guerilla units along the Songhua River. By late 1932, Ma Jeom-san became the central figure in the Manchurian resistance—withstanding months of fierce anti-Japanese insurgency across 15 provinces. Rising from a humble commander to the de facto military governor of Heilongjiang and, following Zhang Zuolin's line, later promoted to Governor, Ma became a national hero after the 9/18 Incident.

Despite his modest height—barely 1.6 meters—Ma's courage, decisiveness, and astuteness became legendary in Liaoning and Heilongjiang. In early winter 1933, unable to sustain the resistance in Manchuria, Ma led nearly 70,000 of his forces into Siberia, spending eight months near Tomsk with fellow anti-Japanese troops. In 1934, he returned to Nanjing, was appointed commander of the Northeast Advance Corps by the Nationalist Government, and led cavalry units from northern Shanxi Province alongside me, the commander of the Second Guerrilla Corps of the Liberation Army.

By 1941, he passed away in Tianjin, while still dreaming of liberating Manchuria. Ma Jeom-san's unwavering patriotism and dedication to freeing his nation and people earned him eternal renown in Chinese history.

First Minister of National Defense General Lee Beom-seok's Achievements and Summary

The core question of this topic is: Why do we now face the urgent need to prepare for war? The answer lies in how we must confront North Korea's nuclear and missile threats with clear determination and resolute defense to prevent invasion and destruction. Although the challenge grows increasingly severe with North Korea's persistent provocations along the frontline, our historical love and respect for the national military, shaped by over 60 years of alliance with the United States, remains steadfast. This fierce patriotism pushes us to look back to the passionate spirit at liberation and founding of the military and to revive that same dedication to build a strong armed force.

The Republic of Korea's military today is the product of countless patriots' sacrifices, sweat, and blood. The Korean Empire lost its sovereignty and military authority without any real battle, falling helplessly to Japanese militarists and imperialists. Following that, numerous patriots poured their blood, sweat, and tears into the armed independence struggle against Japanese colonial rule. Through their spirit of loyalty and patriotism, the essence of our national identity lived on, enabling the Republic of Korea to rise again.

Determined never again to lose our country, the Korean military was established as the main force to defend the nation, continuing to the present day. However, many today undervalue the military that existed before the Korean War, remembering only the creation of the South Korean army under the U.S. military government's 8800600 plan and the modernization efforts that followed the war with massive U.S. support. The military formed at the founding of the Republic of Korea is largely forgotten, overshadowed by post-war developments.

Why do we neglect that the Republic of Korea's military backbone, spirit, and firm identity were laid down at the nation's founding, and that this legacy continues to this day? One reason is the self-deprecating historical perception rooted in remnants of Japanese colonial influence within society, the early military leadership formed mainly by former Japanese and Manchurian soldiers, the complicated legacy of the Korean War anti-communist struggle led by them, and the focus on material economic growth and long-term alliance with the U.S. that has excessively shaped our military culture.

These factors contribute to a distorted social view of the military, which undermines the morale of the majority of dedicated servicemen and fosters a flawed military culture within the forces. A society and military that fail to properly learn from history will lose the strength needed to fulfill their roles effectively when it matters most.

Understanding the roots of an organization gives it pride and confidence, as well as mental resilience...

The decisive blow that awakens the spirit of unwavering loyalty becomes a crucial impetus. This forms the invisible fighting power of soldiers—the foundation of military spirit and morale—and instills pride and dignity in the general public.

The first Minister of National Defense, General Lee Beom-seok, was an unassailable giant to many citizens and especially to soldiers who lived through the 1960s and '70s. The reasons are clear. First, as a 16-year-old high school student who fled to China, he led the Cheongsanri Battle, served as chief of staff of the Liberation Army, became the second division commander, and shortly before the war's end was the commander of the domestic partisan army. For over 30 years, he consistently embodied the armed anti-Japanese independence struggle and the spirit of self-reliant patriotism, symbolizing the warrior's spirit.

Second, as the first Minister of National Defense, General Lee was the spiritual and physical link connecting the history of the armed anti-Japanese struggle from the independence army through the liberation army directly to the Republic of Korea's military. He laid the foundation for the newly formed country's defense, designing it and instilling its principles and spirit.

Third, he completed two years and six months at a formal military academy (the modern Chinese military academy in Yunnan, graduating at the top of his class), gaining rare exposure to advanced European military powers during his armed struggle against Japan. Fluent in English, Chinese, and Russian, with deep knowledge of Western horse riding and martial arts, and even an accomplished novelist with two books published, he was an extraordinary figure.

In the early 1960s, when food was so scarce that people contemplated ending their lives, General Lee lived modestly in the outskirts of Seoul, moving through neighborhoods like Sindang-dong and Pulgusudong before finally settling in Daebang-dong. Despite having no wealth or property, he was surrounded by loyal followers and was known for his integrity and character.

At a time when North Korea's provocations threaten the Korean Peninsula's security more than ever, we look back on the legacy of General Lee Beom-seok, the "iron general" and first Minister of National Defense, to gain the lessons necessary for living today and preparing for tomorrow.

Upon his return to Korea, General Lee was appointed the first Minister of National Defense and oversaw the birth of the Korean military. The international situation then was one of post-war restructuring in East Asia. Japan, the dominant power in the region, had been defeated. On the mainland, Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government was pushed out by the Communist forces, fleeing to Taiwan amidst chaos. In short, Japan's defeat, China's division, the rise of the United States, Soviet military presence, and the division of the Korean Peninsula created a geopolitical earthquake.

Immediately after Japan's imperial collapse, the massive maritime power of the United States entered the scene, while communism, centered on the Soviet Union, was expanding across East Asia. Domestically, Korea was caught in ideological turmoil as the country split into North and South amid global shifts, with neither side recognized internationally as the legitimate independent authority. The newborn Republic of Korea government faced the critical challenge of designing its national defense during this turbulent period.

On August 17, 1945, Kim Gu, chairman of the Provisional Government, issued an order to the military forces newly established domestically to proceed to Seoul and take over the Japanese military government led by Governor-General Abe Nobuyuki and the Japanese military command. General Lee Beom-seok, head of the Strategic Intelligence Liaison Group, together with Colonel Barton and Dr. Sergeant Park, Captain Jung Un-su, and about 20 other key figures, boarded a U.S. military transport plane and flew to Yeouido, near Seoul.

General Lee Beom-seok attempted to negotiate with the Japanese military authorities but failed. Guided by the U.S. military, he stayed briefly at the Joseon Hotel before having no choice but to return to China on August 19. After that, for nineteen years, he remained in exile as a member of the Provisional Government, unable to return to the Korean peninsula.

The newly established Republic of Korea was in a difficult situation: it did not have the autonomy to lead the country from Japan, and it faced the dilemma of being a small nation dominated by the logic of strong powers, caught between right and left factions. The first president, Syngman Rhee, appointed General Lee Beom-seok, the first Minister of the Interior and head of the National Defense, with the consent of the Constituent Assembly. He was concurrently appointed as the Minister of National Defense.

General Lee's appointment linked the government of the Republic of Korea with the legal traditions of the Shanghai Provisional Government, lending significant legitimacy to the nascent government. At the same time, his appointment reflected a deeper political strategy. The temporary Minister of National Defense under the U.S. military government was General Yoo Dong-ryul, who had served as Chief of Staff of the Provisional Government Army. As the first

Minister of National Defense, it was appropriate to appoint a seasoned and capable general who symbolized military strength, experience, and resistance against Japanese occupation, and General Lee was the ideal figure for that role.

During his tenure, from August 15, 1948, to March 21, 1949, for eight months, General Lee devoted himself wholeheartedly to establishing the foundation of the military and national defense.

At 1:30 PM on August 15, 1948, after the inauguration ceremony of the Republic of Korea's government at the Central Government Building, a historic military parade took place for the Army and Navy. Attendees included President Rhee and his wife, ministers from various departments, and military officers from the Army and Navy. The parade began at the square in front of the Central Government Building and lasted about 40 minutes.

The Army Band led, followed by elite Army units selected from various regions, the Navy Band, Navy units, and special forces. The military parade was held to celebrate the establishment of the government and was a declaration of the formation of the national armed forces.

Legally, the establishment of the national armed forces was based on the Ministry of National Defense, created under the Government Organization Act, which was promulgated on July 17, a month before the government was founded. The appointment of the Minister of National Defense on August 15 marked the start of the organization of the national military, beginning with the transition of the Joseon Police Force into the National Military and the proclamation of the Military Organization Act.

Articles 14 and 17 of the Government Organization Act stipulated that the Ministry of National Defense and its Minister held military authority over the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

As Minister Yoo Dong-ryul testified, until just before the government was formed, the so-called National Military was still called the Police Force, reflecting its policing function. However, it had now become a military organization responsible for national security in both name and reality.

Immediately after the government was established, on August 16, Lee Beom-seok was sworn in as the Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense. At the same time, the Ministry of National Defense was staffed with senior U.S. military advisors, including Roberts.

Regarding the organization of the so-called "National Defense Forces," Korean authorities proposed their own plans.

It is known that it was eventually established. General Lee Beom-seok, through a press conference, spoke about the organization of the National Defense Forces, stating that the Army, Navy, and Air Force would be led by the President, with the Minister of National Defense acting as the President’s deputy to command military administration and operations of the three branches. He declared that the size of the armed forces would be maintained at a minimum standing force, considering the national economic ratio and hypothetical enemy threats.

On that day, a meeting was held between the Republic of Korea government and the U.S. Military Government's Civil Affairs Office regarding the transfer of administrative authority between the two. Government representatives included Prime Minister Lee Beom-seok, Interior Minister Yoon Chi-young, and Foreign Minister Jang Taek-sang, while the U.S. side was represented by Civil Affairs Director General Hellickson and political advisor Drumright. The meeting took place in Room 200 of the U.S. Civil Affairs Office at the Central Government Building, where discussions began on supply and material transfer during the transitional period.

A key military issue at the time was the Korea-U.S. military agreement. On August 24, General Hodge visited President Rhee and formally signed the military agreement that had been negotiated by both sides. The agreement was concluded between President Rhee, the constitutional commander-in-chief of the national armed forces, and U.S. Commander General Hodge stationed in Korea. It stipulated that the agreement would remain effective only temporarily until U.S. forces withdrew from Korea, dealing with joint security and defense between the Republic of Korea and the United States. It included the phased transfer of command and control rights over the National Defense Forces—which consisted of the police, security forces, and naval security units—as soon as possible.

The agreement also contained provisions for the U.S. to continue supporting the Korean government with training, equipment, and related matters for the security forces and naval security units. Through this process, General Lee Beom-seok, who was concurrently serving as Prime Minister, was formally commissioned as a U.S. military officer.

On the 5th of the same month, the Joseon Security Forces were reorganized into the Army, and the naval security units were renamed the Navy. At this time, along with the administrative transfer of the police, the transfer of security force personnel also occurred, drawing considerable public attention. On August 31, Security Force Director Yoo Dong-yeol and Minister of National Defense Lee Beom-seok formally signed the handover of the security forces' administration, completing the transfer of the security forces to the new government's Minister of National Defense, with military command authority vested in the Minister.

As the first Minister of National Defense, General Lee's major achievements and significance include:

1. Establishing the ideology and spirit of the Republic of Korea's military. Upon the founding of the military, General Lee declared that "the military spirit inherits the independent struggle spirit of the Liberation Army," aiming to pass down the independence movement's ideals and the national consciousness of self-reliance and sovereignty as the foundation of the military's spirit. This spiritual inheritance was concretized through the Ministry of National Defense's regulations and the military's three core pledges.

Upon assuming office, General Lee issued Ministry of National Defense Directive No. 1, firmly establishing the legitimacy of the Republic of Korea's armed forces, defining the character of the military, and clarifying the mission of military personnel.

It has come to be firmly established. From the beginning of military administration, with the goal of building the national armed forces, all officers and soldiers have quietly devoted themselves to responding to the earnest demands of the people with unwavering loyalty. They pray ceaselessly for the blessings of Heaven and Earth.

The spirit of national military construction is to strengthen the unity and morale of all military personnel, and they are strictly ordered to thoroughly observe and faithfully carry out the instructions in this regard.

1. From today, all officers and soldiers of the Army and Navy at every level have earned the honorable title of the national defense forces of the Republic of Korea. Therefore, all personnel must rigorously uphold the spirit of diligence, loyalty, and dedication, strictly observe military discipline and regulations, and promote the virtues of a patriotic military that respects comradeship.
2. With the end of the U.S. military government and the establishment of the new government during this transitional period, military personnel must remain steadfast and not be swayed or confused by rumors. Above all, they must fulfill their duties with diligence and loyalty.
3. As this nation is newly born, with a spirit of reform and renewal, it is essential to organize a vigorous and youthful military. At the same time, through strong discipline and excellent cooperation, the military must unite with sincerity to maintain peace and gain the love and trust of the entire population. All military personnel must cherish the nation as their life.

The significance of this directive is very important.

The security forces refer to the National Defense Guards.

The father of the Republic of Korea's national defense construction and first Minister of National Defense, General Lee Beom-seok, established the identity of the Republic of Korea's military. The question of whether the government of the Republic of Korea or the U.S. military government created the military arises, but understanding the facts clarifies the concept.

The process is as follows: First, on July 17, 1948, based on the Constitution and Government Organization Act No. 1, the legal foundation for establishing the Ministry of National Defense was laid. Subsequently, on August 15, General Lee Beom-seok was appointed as the first Minister of National Defense. On that day, an order was issued by the Minister to incorporate the U.S. military government's security forces into the national army, and on September 1, the security forces were formally incorporated into the national army.

This order had great significance because it made the national army the main body by legally absorbing the security forces created during the military administration period. This fundamentally resolved the problem of the army being seen as a collection of U.S.-trained

mercenaries and created a foundation for legitimate military sovereignty. It was a brilliant move that achieved both justification and practical benefits.

At the time of the Republic of Korea government's establishment, there were diverse social demands, including calls for the complete disbandment of the security forces as a prerequisite for the reorganization of the national army and proposals to restructure or transform the security forces into the Liberation Army. In consideration of these public opinions, the Republic of Korea government incorporated the security forces into the national army.

Vice Minister Lee Beom-seok, a veteran of the Liberation Army, and Vice Minister Choi Yong-deok were appointed to ensure that the national army inherits the independent struggle spirit of the Liberation Army. This was formally established in the first directive issued by the Minister of National Defense.

North Korea initially set its founding day as February 8, 1948, but since 1978, it has celebrated April 25 as its military founding day. This date is based on the claim that Kim Il-sung organized the first partisan guerrilla group on April 25, 1932, in the small town of Antu in southern Manchuria. However, this is widely viewed as part of the prolonged idolization of Kim Il-sung, a piece of propaganda and political agitation. Nonetheless, in the ideological conflict between South and North, we must clearly recognize our own legitimacy without any blind spots.

Secondly, this directive clearly defined the character of the national army as the national defense forces. This means that the military of the Republic of Korea defends the country and protects its citizens. In contrast, North Korea calls its army the People's Army, claiming it is created and protected by the people. In reality, the North Korean People's Army is defined under Article 46 of the Workers' Party of Korea's charter as the revolutionary armed forces of the party, making it the army of the party's leader.

Thirdly, the mission of the national army personnel was clearly declared. The spiritual core values urged for all soldiers to practice were loyalty to the country, strict observance of military discipline, comradeship, the promotion of military virtues, diligence, and unity. At that time, the national army, while still young, was embraced with the affection of the entire nation and considered the nation's lifeline.

The urgent task became to announce and solidify the national army's three major oaths. From October of that year, the army undertook a major discipline campaign and concrete practice of these oaths. Vice Minister Lee Beom-seok participated in December 1948 when the three major oaths were publicly declared, symbolizing the spirit of the national army personnel as follows:

1. We will follow the blood sacrifice of our predecessors and defend the democratic state even unto death.
2. We solemnly swear to remember that our superiors and comrades were killed by the Communist Party.
3. We will unite as strongly as steel, strictly observe military discipline, and fulfill the mission of the national army.

This original text of the three major oaths was revised early in 1949 and renamed the "National Army Oath," also known as "The Way of the Soldier," with the following content:

1. We are the Republic of Korea's national army. We will defend the country even unto death.
2. We will unite as strongly as steel and crush the Communist invaders.
3. We will raise the Taegeuk flag on the summit of Mt. Baekdu and wield the sword of victory along the Tuman River.

All of the above firmly established the fundamental nature of the Republic of Korea's national army.

Next, the concept of the Republic of Korea's national defense was clarified as a combined defense force.

Vice Minister Lee Beom-seok, upon assuming office, judged that to effectively counter the expanding international communist forces, the military forces of the democratic camp, centered on the United States, must be united. Should war break out on the Korean Peninsula, the Republic of Korea must receive operational support from the U.S. military and conduct joint operations. Based on this, the concept of a combined defense was adopted, with emphasis placed on cultivating a powerful ground force.

The National Army Oath was officially established as a military directive, "The Way of the Soldier," on December 1, 1957, under Ministry of National Defense Directive No. 28. Since then, it has undergone several revisions, and the current version was promulgated on September 17, 1976, as Ministry of National Defense Directive No. 212.

The concept of combined defense originates from President Syngman Rhee's speech commemorating the founding of the government on August 15, 1948, where he stated:

"We have much to learn and receive help from the United States. Without the support and friendship of all allies, it will be difficult to solve our problems... Regardless of whether a country is large or small, strong or weak, we must rely on one another to survive... It is important to renew friendship between all Americans and Koreans."

This formed the background for the combined defense concept.

Therefore, although the South Korea–U.S. alliance is often said to have been formed as a result of the Korean War (June 25th War), its importance can actually be traced back to the very founding of the Republic of Korea government.

3. Emphasizing the volunteer soldier system and the training of regular troops (conscription system).
   Under the policy framework of the United States-led combined defense, Minister of National Defense Lee Beom-seok focused on building regular troops and strengthening ideological unity through anti-communist spirit as the second priority. To this end, he

emphasized the volunteer soldier system based on "volunteerism" and ideological education aimed at unifying thought through political work.

The volunteer soldier system, which Lee Beom-seok, as the supreme commander of the Liberation Army, developed over 33 years of accumulated military knowledge and field experience, was grounded in the principle of regular troops. It aimed to quickly improve the quality of each individual soldier, thereby leveling the overall quality of the national army and equipping it with excellent qualities befitting an advanced democratic nation.

Additionally, each volunteer soldier was expected to be a model military person imbued with democratic ideals and a strong fighting spirit against communism.

Lee Beom-seok, recognized as the father of the construction of the Republic of Korea's defense, was committed to instilling a sense of honor and dedication in the military as the protector of the nation's territory.

Minister Lee did not limit the scope of training regular troops only to active-duty soldiers but expanded it to include all young men who would join the military in the future. By doing so, he sought to foster patriotism, familial loyalty, and anti-communist spirit as foundational elements to strengthen the nationwide mental defense power.

When Lee Beom-seok resigned as Minister of National Defense on March 21, 1949, in his retirement speech, he stated:
"...An army must have not only quality but also quantity. Having only quality is not enough, and having only quantity is also insufficient. Quantity is the tangible existence, while quality is intangible, but these must be combined comprehensively. No matter how good the quality is, if the quantity is extremely insufficient, one cannot overcome a crisis. One well-functioning tank may only be able to destroy three or four enemy tanks, but it cannot suppress ten or twenty. Even excellent artillery can only overpower three or four enemy guns, but not ten or twenty. This means that an appropriate quantity is necessary. The same logic applies to the superiority of quality. If quality is poor, no matter how large the quantity, it is useless. Someone who does not know how to shoot a gun will inevitably lose to someone who does."

Through this, he strongly emphasized the importance of his leadership policy, the volunteer soldier system, and the correlation between quality and quantity.

4. Fully committing to ideological unity in the armed forces.
   The ideological division caused by the partition of the homeland was a fundamental source of political instability and social chaos in South Korea, threatening the framework of national security. Moreover, during the three years of U.S. military government's democratization policies, communists were able to be employed or enlisted in government agencies, key institutions, or police forces without any restrictions.

They were able to infiltrate, and as a result, these forces penetrated even inside the security guards. They organized the pro-Communist forces and expanded their organizational network. Their secret activities continued to increase even after being integrated into the national army, casting a serious shadow over military security and stability.

Considering this situation, General Lee Beom-seok deeply felt the urgency of ideological unity within the military and emphasized the second major guiding policy: the active promotion of political work aimed at ideological unity and the cultivation of an anti-Communist spirit.

The ideological unity policy was based on the initial directive by President Syngman Rhee in his first inaugural address, where he declared that the nation must reform and purge all the deep-rooted evils oppressing the people, promote ideological unity, and thereby strengthen the nation's independence, coexistence with democratic allies worldwide, and the foundation for joint prosperity. This would require unceasing efforts to enhance the national strength and historical qualities of the Korean people.

The fundamental spirit of the military that Lee Beom-seok envisioned was rooted in inheriting the Liberation Army's spirit of independence struggle. The core was to establish a foundation as ideological warriors equipped with unwavering patriotism and anti-Communist spirit.

Therefore, a firm belief in achieving victory in battle at all costs, vigorous courage, and an unwavering patriotic and anti-Communist spirit were essential. These also encompassed a strong sense of responsibility that transcended life and death and a noble willingness to sacrifice oneself for the nation and people — all inseparable from patriotism and anti-Communism.

Accordingly, on November 29, 1948, the Ministry of National Defense established the Second Bureau (Political Bureau, later reorganized as the Political Training Bureau) to realize the military's ideological goals and cultivate an anti-Communist democratic spirit. Song Myeon-su, who had been the political officer of the Liberation Army's 2nd Division, was appointed as the first director to lead full-scale political activities.

Initially, the Political Bureau included American military advisers such as Major General Roberts, Chief of the U.S. Military Advisory Group in Korea, Colonel Wright, and Captain Hausman. They instituted a system placing political officers within the military units, which was a system that would have been impossible in any fully democratic or politically independent military. Therefore, this system was opposed and subsequently renamed the Political Training Bureau and reformed.

Meanwhile, General Lee Beom-seok, who had a thorough understanding of the psychology and strategy of communists, anticipated an invasion by North Korean communists into South Korea and established a North Korea intelligence-gathering unit within the Ministry of National Defense.

On October 16, 1948, the Uljin Incident occurred, followed by the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion on October 19, carried out by the 14th Army Regiment. In response to these events and as countermeasures against guerrillas dispatched from the North, the Ministry of National Defense

established the Fourth Bureau (Special Operations Bureau), tasked with blocking infiltration routes, annihilating guerrillas, conducting incursions into North Korean territory, and gathering intelligence.

Based on past experience organizing domestic partisan forces with support from the U.S. military's strategic intelligence agency during the Liberation Army period, there was an intention to create a special intelligence unit (tracking unit) responsible for intelligence gathering and counterintelligence. However, the U.S. military advisory group strongly opposed deploying a special unit into North Korea, arguing that establishing such a bureau within the Ministry of National Defense was beyond the authority of the defense minister responsible for military affairs and that it was fundamentally unacceptable to have a special unit directly under the Ministry of National Defense.

Nevertheless, General Lee Beom-seok insisted on creating the Fourth Bureau within the Ministry of National Defense and establishing the special unit within the army.

Additionally, in response to the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion on October 19, 1948, the first major purge was carried out to eliminate the communist organizational network infiltrated within the military. At that time, 324 active-duty soldiers and 40 military-related civilians suspected of subversive activity were arrested.

Despite opposition from the U.S. military advisory group, General Lee Beom-seok established the Political Training Bureau and the Intelligence Bureau within the Ministry of National Defense. This later became the foundation for anti-communism within the Republic of Korea Armed Forces and was expanded nationwide after the Korean War (June 25, 1950).

General Lee's anti-communism stemmed from his personal experiences. It qualitatively differed from the anti-communism held by some politicians and intellectuals in Korean society at that time. Most of them opposed communism primarily to suppress the communists' attempt to seize power during the liberation period. In contrast, General Lee's anti-communism was based on his direct experience in fighting and witnessing communist strategies and psychology during the anti-Japanese struggle, and he sought to defeat them through this understanding.

(5) Expansion of military units and establishment of the female corps and special units.

Focusing on expanding the military forces, General Lee Beom-seok, after October 28, 1948, reorganized six regiments — the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st — and established the 7th Women's Battalion, increasing the army's size to 100,000 troops.

General Lee also founded the female military corps. He showed deep interest in how to utilize female human resources in defense policy formulation. The concept of modern warfare requiring maximum use of available personnel resources was something the general clearly embraced.

Establishing a female corps was not easy in Korean society, where feudal Confucian values were strong. Nevertheless, General Lee drew on the example of the U.S. military's female corps,

overcoming opposition within the army and decisively implemented the establishment of a female military unit.

Moreover, recognizing the need to strengthen counterintelligence organizations, under Article 7 of the Ministry of National Defense's direct order, the Fourth Bureau (Special Operations Bureau) was established within the Ministry of National Defense in December 1948.

The Ministry of National Defense was established, and around the same time, special units were created within the Army. The newly formed units included the Army Reconnaissance School (later renamed the 1st Independent Battalion of the 38th Seoul Guerrilla Unit), the Holim Unit composed of North Korean defectors who moved south (later renamed the Yeongdeungpo Academy), and the Boguk Unit, made up of 600 North Korean defectors (later renamed the 803rd Independent Battalion), as well as guerrilla battalions within various corps.

The Home Defense Force was created to establish a national defense system capable of simultaneously defending both the front and rear against communism and other enemies. Based on the National Military Organization Act, which organized the national military into the Regular Army and the Home Defense Force, an emergency presidential decree was issued on November 20, 1948. On the same day, the Home Defense Force was established to recruit young men willing to serve voluntarily.

This was founded on the judgment that the limited manpower of the regular army alone was insufficient to fulfill the mission of national defense, so a larger reserve force needed to be secured in advance. The Home Defense Force was divided into two types: combat units and special units, with the intention that they would be incorporated into the regular army as defense needs dictated.

A distinctive feature of the Home Defense Force was that all its members were reservists. Each belonged to a local regiment according to their place of residence, continuing their civilian occupations while receiving necessary military training.

Alongside the establishment of the Home Defense Force, the Army Headquarters set up a Home Defense Force Office, and advisory offices for the Home Defense Force were placed within active regiments (except the 4th, 9th, and 12th Regiments), beginning its formation.

The Home Defense Force, thus organized, saw the establishment of four brigades on January 7, 1949: the 101st, 102nd, 103rd, and 106th Brigades. These brigades were later disbanded by the second Minister of National Defense, a graduate of the 8th class of the Military Academy, on January 1 of the same year, but were later reborn as today's National Intelligence Service.

Colonels Oh Kwang-seon, Yoo Seung-yeol, Ahn Byung-beom, and Kwon Soon were each appointed as brigade commanders. Officers from each regiment down to the company level were commissioned from active-duty officers. By January 11, under this system, the organization of ten regiments was completed, including the 101st (Seoul), 111th (Suwon), 102nd, 103rd (Jeonju), 113th (Onyang), 105th (Busan), 106th (Daegu), 101st (Jeongju), 1st (Chuncheon), and 110th (Gangneung).

Each unit at the city, county, and township levels was staffed with active-duty officers. As the size of the Home Defense Force gradually increased, measures were taken to strengthen its command structure. On December 29, 1948, the previous organization within the Army Headquarters was reorganized into the Home Defense Force, and on January 11, 1949, it was reorganized again, establishing the Home Defense Force Command directly under the Ministry of National Defense.

The Home Defense Force is considered a prototype of the modern South Korean military reserve system in terms of its organization, structure, and function. As mentioned earlier, all members of the Home Defense Force were reservists who belonged to regiments based on their place of residence, continued their civilian jobs, and received necessary military training.

Regarding officer commissioning, the Home Defense Force followed the same process as regular officers, with both special and standard recruitment. However, age limits were imposed for commanders: battalion commanders and above had to be under 60 years old, company commanders under 50, and platoon commanders under 40.

As the Home Defense Force rapidly expanded, on March 4, a Home Defense Force Cadet Training School was established in Yongsan, Seoul, to train officers. Lieutenant Colonel Jang Seok-ryun was appointed as the principal. On July 10 of the same year, it was renamed the Home Defense Force Military Academy. However, it was closed on August 15, shortly before the disbandment of the Home Defense Force that year.

The Home Defense Force produced a total of 1,080 graduates over four classes at the Military Academy, of which 640 later became active-duty officers.

The Home Defense Force was disbanded after Shin Sung-mo became the Minister of National Defense, citing the implementation of the conscription system as the reason. The Military Service Act was promulgated, transitioning from the previous volunteer system to a national conscription system, resolving manpower supplementation issues. However, many believe the real reason for the disbandment within just ten months was political—intended to curb the influence of General Lee Beom-seok—and this decision resulted in a reduction of reserve military forces.

There remains regret that if the Home Defense Force, numbering around 40,000 personnel, had been intact when the Korean War broke out, it could have been effective in repelling the North Korean invasion. The disbandment led to a weakened organizational defense system in the rear areas during the outbreak of the Korean War, forcing part of the standing army to remain tied up in rear defense duties and thus creating a gap in front-line defense capabilities.

Subsequently, rear-area defense operations were carried out by active-duty forces until the January 21, 1968 incident, which led to the revival of the reserve military system—the first revival in over 20 years.

The founding of the Army Military Academy to foster the spirit of national defense, the incorporation of the Police Cadet School, and the significant increase in intake of the 7th and 8th

classes led to the replacement of many officers formerly from the Japanese army. This strengthened the legitimacy of the South Korean military and ultimately prepared it for the Korean War in June 1950.

In Japan, some regarded the revival of the reserve system under President Park Chung-hee as politically motivated and criticized it, even calling for its abolition. However, the reserve system was an essential organization established from the founding of the military to fight and defeat communism, a fact the Home Defense Force clearly demonstrated.

As soon as the government was established, the national military was also established, and with the absorption and integration of the Security Corps into the military, naturally, the Army Military Academy was launched. By absorbing the Security Corps Military Academy and integrating its graduates into the history of the Army Military Academy, the institution grew.[1])

During the Security Corps period, the Security Corps Military Academy produced six classes, from the 1st to the 6th, each class about 200 students. General Lee Beom-seok decided to dramatically increase the number of Army Military Academy entrants to overcome the absolute shortage of junior officers caused by the expansion of national defense capabilities. Accordingly, the 7th class (the first class to officially enter under the name of the Army Military Academy) had 1,096 cadets, and the 8th class had 1,848 cadets.[2]

Together with two classes from the Army English School totaling 110 graduates, and 1,254 graduates from the Security Corps Military Academy classes 1 through 6, a total of 1,364 personnel joined the existing officer corps, more than doubling its size. These new officers were divided broadly into three groups.

First, those with prior military experience who had been behind the scenes during military participation. This group included people from the 3rd Army such as Kim Hong-il, Ahn Chun-saeng, Lee Joon-sik, and former Japanese Army veterans like Yoo Seung-ryeol and Kim Seok.[3]

(Note: The current Army Military Academy history refers to this change as a simple administrative renaming, but strictly speaking, this is inappropriate. Legally, it was an absorption into the national defense forces. The U.S. military government recognized this but the Korean military maintained its own identity.)[4]

The 7th class included 561 regular cadets and 24 special cadets, with experienced military personnel such as Lee Ju-il and Park Im-hang from the Manchurian Army. Their inclusion filled the military's upper leadership ranks.

Second, youth group members from society, including leaders of the Liberation Army who entered individually, and youth groups created by General Lee Beom-seok (the National Youth Corps), General Ji Cheong-cheon (Daedong Youth Corps), and right-wing youth group members

who had migrated from the North like the Northwest Youth Association, Daedong River Comrades Association, and Amnok River Comrades Association.

Third, pure civilians.

The expansion of enrollment for the 7th and 8th classes at the Army Military Academy had an enormous impact on both the military and Korean society.

First, it greatly contributed to establishing the legitimacy of the military. They quickly reversed the previous trend where about 75% of officers were from the Japanese or Manchurian armies, diluting the Japanese and Manchurian military influence.[5] Before the Korean War broke out, the presence of Japanese and Manchurian veterans was reduced to about one-third.[6]

Second, these officers would soon be the main force defending the Republic of Korea from communist invasion during the Korean War. Special cadets served as division commanders and above, while regular cadets commanded companies and battalions, physically resisting communist aggression.

Lastly, the advanced administrative and organizational management skills they acquired in the military, modeled after the U.S. system, greatly contributed to the development of the Republic of Korea thereafter.

For example, among the 110 graduates from the two classes of the Army English School, 87 were former Japanese army officers, 21 from the Manchurian army, and only 2 from the Liberation Army, meaning 99% had Japanese military backgrounds.[7]

The influence of General Lee Beom-seok on the history of the Army Military Academy can be summarized as follows:

First, for the first time in the history of the Republic of Korea Army, an institution named the Army Military Academy was launched as a core institution for cultivating patriotic officers. By absorbing the Security Corps Military Academy, it gained legitimacy as a key military institution.

Second, by expanding enrollment for the 7th and 8th classes, it...

Part 2: The Father of South Korea’s National Defense Construction

Following this, while maintaining the domestic weapons manufacturing plants formerly used by the Japanese military, plans for establishing new factories were swiftly finalized. On November 25, 1948, the Army Ordnance Factory was established, followed by the Navy Ordnance Factory in early 1949, laying the groundwork for self-sufficiency in weapons supply and technical training.

Although General Cheol-gi served as the first Minister of National Defense for only eight months (August 15, 1948 – March 21, 1949), his legacy is immense. To summarize his achievements in one sentence: he infused spirit into the South Korean military, creating not just a military force but a grand vision for national defense. He instilled pride in the armed forces for inheriting the history and spirit of the Independent Army and the Liberation Army.

To praise General Cheol-gi solely because he was the first Minister of National Defense would actually be an understatement. There are three key lessons to learn from him:

First, the spirit of patriotism and defense. During his 30 years in exile in China and after returning to Korea to become the first Minister of National Defense, he embodied the military's duty to love and protect the nation. The difficult years in exile were sustained only by a spirit of patriotism, which gave him the strength to continue armed resistance against Japanese occupation. After his return, as Defense Minister, he bore full responsibility to build a defense force capable of steering the newborn Republic of Korea through its fight against communism.

Second, the spirit of independence. This was reflected in practical defense policies based on national independence. Through the first Defense Ministry directive, the Korean military absorbed the Joseon Gyeongbi Unit, asserting the pride of an independent nation. Some claim the South Korean military was formed by the U.S. military government, but that is only half the story. This view ignores the spiritual foundation of the South Korean military, which, despite inheriting the Joseon Gyeongbi Unit, infused the new military with the ideology and identity of the independent Republic of Korea. History proves that the military policy framework was established by General Cheol-gi as the first Minister of National Defense.

Additionally, the Defense Ministry's Intelligence and Political Departments, which were founded despite conflicts with U.S. military advisors, clearly affirmed national autonomy. At the same time, in practical terms, cooperation with the U.S. military was used to bolster defense, and military officers with Japanese or Manchurian Army backgrounds were allowed to contribute to the new independent state. This pragmatic independence is a lesson for us today, especially as we reflect on the history of the Korea-U.S. alliance and consider how to maintain national defense sovereignty within that alliance.

Third, a firm anti-communist stance was the only way to defeat communism. While most of society emotionally rejected communism because it threatened their property, General Cheol-gi built a system capable of fighting and winning against it. This included establishing the military oath system, the Political Department, intelligence collection units targeting the North, and the Homeland Defense Army.

After General Cheol-gi resigned, the disbandment of the intelligence collection units and the Homeland Defense Army was soon followed by the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, which both confirmed his foresight and exposed the narrow-mindedness of some politicians. The important national defense policies he crafted for the newborn Republic were later politically undermined. However, during the unprecedented crisis of the Korean War, the people deeply understood his visionary insight.

They realized that ideological armament and superior intelligence gathering capabilities were essential to winning the fight against communism. These principles remain core to our military training and the top priority for strengthening our defense capabilities today.

Additionally, appointing civilians with little defense knowledge to the position of Minister of National Defense was inappropriate given the times and circumstances. This remains an important lesson as we continue to face a grave confrontation with North Korea.

Reminiscence of the National Defense Era under General Cheolgi Lee Beom-seok

Foreword

This short essay is a personal recollection of events that took place while General Cheolgi Lee served as the first Minister of National Defense in the Republic of Korea government. It is based on what I directly saw and felt during my time as his Chief Secretary.

There aren't many records remaining from that time, and I must candidly admit that due to time constraints, I wasn't able to conduct a broad investigation of available materials. Nonetheless, I wanted to make clear that this reflection is written in earnest, with the intent to honor the significance of those times.

— *Kang Young-hoon*, Former Prime Minister and Chairman of the 4th Cheolgi Lee Beom-seok Memorial Committee
(Excerpted from *The Biography of Cheolgi Lee Beom-seok*, Part II: "The Father of South Korea's National Defense")

Reassessing General Cheolgi Lee Beom-seok, the First Minister of National Defense

This short piece largely recounts my impressions of General Cheolgi Lee, starting with my first encounter with him and recalling the key concerns and accomplishments he had while serving as Minister of National Defense. I can only describe what I remember from that period, and I hope that in the future a well-researched academic study will be published about his tenure as Minister.

My First Impression of General Cheolgi Lee

It was sometime in the fall of 1946 when I first visited General Lee at his temporary residence in Cheongpa-dong, after he had returned to Korea earlier that spring. At the time, I was working at

the Communications and Intelligence Department, the predecessor of the Ministry of National Defense. The person who suggested I meet with General Lee to hear his stories of military experience was General Lee Myung-jae, who was working in the Intelligence Bureau of the Joseon Constabulary's General Headquarters.

After returning from China following liberation, Lee Myung-jae had close ties with key figures from the Provisional Government and Liberation Army, and he struck me as a politically astute colleague.

General Cheolgi Lee, dressed in a light-colored suit, gave off a surprising impression—not so much as a soldier, but more like an artist or romantic poet, except for his sharp, penetrating eyes. However, the moment he spoke, his powerful voice and confident arguments immediately revealed the strong character and personality that had been forged through a lifetime of armed struggle for independence.

Beyond that first impression, I still clearly remember one of his most memorable remarks: that when fighting communists, it was crucial not to neglect spiritual training and the welfare of soldiers.

Naturally, this conviction of his became firmly reflected in the national military development policy once the Republic of Korea government was founded and he assumed the dual roles of Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense.

Limited Knowledge at the Time

Until then, my knowledge of General Lee was limited to the fact that he had served as Chief of Staff of the Liberation Army. Only much later did I learn that he had received formal military training in China, achieved outstanding military success in the famed Battle of Cheongsan-ri, and briefly returned to Korea right after liberation to oversee the disarmament of Japanese troops.

Back then, I only knew the name of General Lee Cheong-cheon, the Supreme Commander of the Liberation Army.

Before the U.S. Military Government transitioned authority to civilian administration, there had been talk within the American command of appointing a Korean as the head of the Communications and Intelligence Department. There were even rumors that General Lee Cheong-cheon was being considered for the position. However, after Colonel Bernard reportedly visited him in Shanghai for an interview and returned, Lee Cheong-cheon seemed to vanish from the conversation.

Instead, General Lee Eung-jun was asked to recommend a suitable candidate, and he recommended General Yoo Dong-yeol. I served as the interpreter during that recommendation process.

General Lee Eung-jun justified his recommendation as follows:

1. The current officer corps of the Joseon Constabulary was a mix of former soldiers from the Japanese army, the Manchurian army, and the Chinese military, making unity among the leadership a priority.
2. The person appointed must be someone who commands respect not only from the officer corps but also from the general public.

According to General Lee, only General Yoo Dong-yeol, who had served as Chief of Staff in the Provisional Government, met both criteria. His candid, reasoned argument persuaded the U.S. military government to appoint Yoo Dong-yeol as the first Korean head of the Communications and Intelligence Department.

Recruitment of General Lee into the Constabulary

Within the same personnel strategy, the U.S. military government sought to recruit figures from the overseas independence movement who were neither far-left nor far-right.

Sometime in the summer of 1946, General Cheolgi Lee was appointed as an advisor for intelligence and operations in the Communications and Intelligence Department. At that time, General Song Ho-sung, who would later become Commander-in-Chief of the Joseon Constabulary, was appointed as a personnel advisor.

One morning, General Lee came into the office and immediately asked for a brush and ink. He then drafted a set of proposals regarding intelligence and operations, listing about ten points.

Of course, the real power at the time still rested with the U.S. advisory team. When his proposals were ignored, General Lee stopped coming to the office altogether.

His actions sharply contrasted with General Song Ho-sung, who, though he held a desk with no real duties and reviewed no documents from 8 AM to 5 PM, continued to occupy his seat daily.

At that time, General Lee was also leading the Nationalist Youth Corps, which kept him very busy, but the stark contrast in personality and character between the two generals left a strong impression on the young officers.

Among the returning Liberation Army officers, General Lee was one of the few who stood out as truly refreshing and inspiring. His very presence energized the atmosphere, and every word he spoke seemed to carry a lesson. I believe this was not simply due to my youthful naivety.

His First Visit to the Ministry of National Defense

On May 10, 1948, under the supervision of the United Nations Korean Commission, elections were held throughout southern Korea...

First Attendance as Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Korea

On May 10, 1948, under the supervision of the United Nations Korean Commission, the general election was held across South Korea. This marked the formal beginning of the Republic of Korea's government and its armed forces. The Steel General (General Chul-Gi) officially assumed his post as the first Minister of National Defense.

At this time, the task ahead was monumental. The newly formed Republic of Korea faced internal instability, remnants of Japanese military influence, communist insurgencies, and the pressing need to establish a strong, independent military force. General Chul-Gi's leadership was pivotal in shaping the direction and structure of the Korean military in its infancy.

His tenure was characterized by a focus on national security, modernization of military forces, and unifying various armed groups under a single command to protect the sovereignty of the new nation.

The challenges were immense, but the resolve and experience that General Chul-Gi brought from his years as a soldier, a guerrilla fighter, and a wartime strategist gave the fledgling Republic a firm foundation to build upon.

Following the results of the U.S.-supervised general elections, the Constitutional Assembly was convened on May 31 of that year, and with Dr. Syngman Rhee elected as the first President on July 20, General Chŏlgi was appointed as Prime Minister on August 5. Although the Republic of Korea was officially established on August 15, 1948, the formation of the cabinet had already been underway, which was only natural.

Once General Chŏlgi concurrently took office as Minister of National Defense, he sought above all to understand the current situation regarding the appointment of key military commanders. To that end, he summoned me several times—I was then serving as the Director of the Personnel Bureau of the Ministry of National Security. Naturally, I responded to his questions alone, which marked the beginning of my relationship with General Chŏlgi.

Among personnel matters, the Minister's main interest was in the appointments of the Chief of Staff of the Ministry of National Defense and the Army Chief of Staff. From the start, the focus seemed narrowed down to just two figures: General Chae Byŏng-dŏk and General Yi Ŭng-jun. Though General Song Ho-sŏng was the most senior by rank at the time, he was not considered at

all. Another senior officer, General Yi Hyŏng-kŭn, was still studying abroad in the United States and had not yet returned to Korea.

There were rumors that Mr. No T'ae-jun, who had close ties to General Chŏlgi, might be appointed Chief of Staff, but the General never mentioned this possibility to me directly. While he highly valued the military experience of Generals Chae and Yi—both graduates of the Japanese military academy—he ultimately concluded that the Chief of Staff of the Ministry of National Defense, being directly subordinate to the Minister, should be a younger figure, while Army command, involving the control of armed units, was better suited to General Yi Ŭng-jun, who had far more combat experience than Chae, whose background was in ordnance.

I heard General Chŏlgi express these views on the morning of August 19, 1948, during his first official day at the Ministry of National Defense. At the time, I was performing my duties as the morning duty officer. He discussed the appointments of both the Chief of Staff and Army Chief of Staff, and also asked me to recommend someone who could immediately be appointed as his personal aide-de-camp. At that moment, what flashed through my mind was the qualifications such a person should have—someone who, given the Minister's unfamiliarity with internal military affairs, could loyally support him without selfish motives or factional tendencies, and who placed the nation and people above all else.

I immediately thought of General Pak Pyŏng-kwŏn, who at that time held no official post. Upon hearing my recommendation, General Chŏlgi accepted it on the spot. Thus began the connection between General Chŏlgi and General Pak.

As soon as we arrived at the Ministry of National Defense building—located at the site of the current Pacific Hotel at the foot of Namsan—we were busy preparing brush and ink in accordance with the Minister's instructions. Using his own handwriting, General Chŏlgi issued Ministry of National Defense Order No. 1: the appointment of General Chae Byŏng-dŏk as Chief of Staff and General Pak Pyŏng-kwŏn as the Minister's personal aide-de-camp.

After personally finalizing Order No. 1, General Chŏlgi quickly left for the Prime Minister's Office at the Central Government Complex. While concurrently serving as Minister of National Defense and Prime Minister, his daily work routine left him no time to rest, as he constantly moved between the two offices.

Although the official organizational structure of the Ministry of National Defense was not proclaimed until late 1948, the rough framework had taken shape by then, and I assumed the position of Chief Secretary. According to the administrative structure of the government at that time, the highest policymaking body of the Executive Branch was the State Council, composed of ministers. Below it was the Political Affairs Council, consisting of vice ministers, and under that, a Secretariat Chiefs' Council coordinated matters of personnel and finance within the various ministries.

Because each ministry's chief secretary oversaw its personnel and finance, the role of secretariat chief was extremely powerful and was seen as being second only to the minister himself. However, in the case of the Ministry of National Defense, personnel matters were handled by the

Military Affairs Bureau, and financial matters by the Finance Bureau. Thus, the secretariat's role was limited to document processing for matters requiring the Minister's approval.

When General Chŏlgi assumed the position of Minister of National Defense, Korea's national defense capabilities were in a dire state. After World War II, when the U.S. military occupied southern Korea and established military governance, few believed it would last long. But contrary to the hopes of the Korean people, as the Cold War intensified and Korea became the focal point of U.S.-Soviet confrontation, the prospects for an end to military rule grew increasingly dim. In this context, on January 15, 1946, the South Korean Defense Guard and the Coastal Defense Guard were formed as police reserve forces.

Initially, the U.S. military government intended to cap the strength of the guard at 25,000 men, but in anticipation of troop reductions or withdrawals in 1947, the authorized strength was raised to 50,000. The guards were equipped only with light arms and infantry weapons.

At the time of their creation, the U.S. military government envisioned the guards primarily serving as internal security forces, akin to a reserve police force. Therefore, U.S. training manuals emphasized riot control and civil unrest. However, as North Korean communist forces began to stage frequent cross-border incursions, the officers of the guard inevitably took an interest in preparing countermeasures and gradually developed their training from basic platoon and company drills to more advanced combat exercises.

When the Korean government was established, General Chŏlgi, as the newly appointed Minister of National Defense, inherited a national army whose training and equipment levels, by his own battlefield standards, were wholly inadequate for national defense. More pressing than material shortcomings, however, was the ideological issue among the troops.

Although the recruitment system under military government was entirely volunteer-based, given the fierce struggle between left- and right-wing political factions, it would have been naive to think that the Communist Party—whose goal was revolutionary overthrow—would not attempt to infiltrate the military. To fail to anticipate such a tactic would have been either dangerously ignorant of communist strategy or hopelessly idealistic.

In fact, subsequent rebellion incidents proved that a significant number of leftist elements had entered the army through the volunteer system. Nonetheless, at the time, the U.S. military government insisted that as long as soldiers pledged to obey military discipline and superior orders, there would be no problem—an astonishingly naive stance, reflecting their ignorance of communist tactics and their simplistic liberal idealism. Ultimately, this would cost them dearly.

Thus, General Chŏlgi, as Minister of National Defense, was saddled with the heavy burden of having to convert a Defense Guard infiltrated by communists—due to the U.S. military government's flawed personnel policies—into a proper national army. The reorganized National Army, born simultaneously with the founding of the Republic of Korea, was not built on a proper conscription system suited to an independent nation. Rather, it had originated from the U.S. military government's organization of a police reserve, and was composed entirely of volunteers, with no reserve force whatsoever.

The South had not secured a standing force in the Uijeongbu sector...
As a result, the question of how to create a reserve force that could support the inferior South Korean army in the event of an emergency, especially in comparison to the manpower of the North Korean communist bloc, became one of the most urgent national defense issues facing the first Minister of National Defense of the new Republic.

Chain of Command under the National Defense Organization Law
According to the Government Organization Act, the Minister of National Defense was in charge of military administration, while under the National Army Organization Act, he also performed duties related to military command as delegated by the President. This created a delicate relationship between military administration and command.

Some personnel trained under the Japanese military system were accustomed to the Japanese principle of separating military administration (군정) and military command (군령). However, most of the young officers in the National Defense Guard—who were envisioned as the foundation of the future national military—did not object to the American system of integrating administration and command.

There was a strong argument, especially from those influenced by the European model, for the independence of military command in order to prevent national command authority from being swayed every time a new government came to power. However, from the viewpoint that military administration and command must cooperate closely in practice, the integrated American-style military system was ultimately considered more reasonable.

In establishing the fundamental structure of the military system, it was clear that General Chulgi Lee Beom-seok had a decisive influence. The Minister of National Defense was thus tasked not only with overseeing military administration but also executing military command as delegated by the President. From this perspective, the role of the Chief of Staff was merely a support function under the Minister in both administrative and command affairs.

Later, with the outbreak of the North Korean communist invasion and the transfer of operational control of the ROK forces to the United Nations Command, the position of Chief of Staff of the Ministry of National Defense became practically redundant and was abolished.

Revival of Lee Beom-seok's Vision After the War
After the war, as the issue of the President’s supreme command over the military resurfaced, a Joint Chiefs of Staff was established within the Ministry of National Defense to coordinate command among the Army, Navy, and Air Force. With the formation of an American-style military strategy consultation body consisting of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the service chiefs, General Lee Beom-seok’s vision of integrated military command and administration was to some extent revived.

Upon establishment of the government, the Minister of National Defense was legally tasked with military administration and command. However, due to misunderstandings about this structure,

political rumors began to spread, claiming that giving General Lee authority over the military could increase the risk of a military coup.

These suspicions intensified when the Defense Ministry began forming psychological warfare units and intelligence operations groups, including specialized propaganda and espionage divisions. But from the beginning, General Lee Beom-seok's conception of national defense was crystal clear: to build a strong, ideologically committed anti-communist military while strengthening military ties with the United States within the context of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War structure.

He believed that psychological warfare units were essential to counter the ideological warfare waged by communists, and that dedicated intelligence and covert operations units were necessary to prepare for irregular warfare. This belief stemmed from the lessons General Lee had personally learned through his direct experience participating in major battles between the Nationalists and Communists in China.

With the cooperation of the U.S. advisory group, two new units were eventually created in the Ministry of National Defense: the Psychological Warfare Bureau, to counter communist ideological warfare, and the 4th Bureau, designed to counter the North Korean bloc's irregular warfare.

Naturally, these units were staffed primarily by veterans of the Korean Liberation Army—comrades who had fought alongside General Lee in China and who had intimate knowledge of the Chinese civil war between the Nationalists and Communists. To politicians who were jealous of General Lee, this appeared to be evidence that he was using his authority to form a faction within the military. This gave ammunition to anti-Lee political conspiracies.

Soldier-First Principle Misunderstood

There were also suspicions that General Lee's so-called "Soldier-First Principle" was misunderstood. When we say "Soldier-First," what first comes to mind is the improvement of enlisted soldiers' welfare. While it goes without saying that morale is closely tied to welfare, General Lee's philosophy went far deeper.

In fact, the "Soldier-First Principle" seemed, at first glance, to clash with the traditional military leadership principle of strict discipline. In a military organization, completing assigned missions requires rigid discipline, and absolute obedience to orders from superiors is the bedrock of command. Therefore, had someone with zero military experience proposed a "Soldier-First" slogan, it might have been dismissed as a shallow popularity tactic by someone who didn't understand the nature of military structure.

But General Lee Beom-seok had lived his entire life in combat. Coming from such a man, the "Soldier-First" slogan could not be easily criticized. Though many couldn't fully grasp the meaning behind it, they nevertheless accepted it as a fitting principle for building a new nation and a new, modern military.

His concept of “Soldier-First” obviously went far beyond just better welfare for soldiers. Several core ideas underpinned this philosophy.

First, it reflected his understanding of the nature of war provoked by communists. Fighting communists wasn’t just about physical combat, but primarily about ideological and psychological warfare. Even when I first met General Lee upon his return from China, he emphasized this point repeatedly.

There was a concept called "369." The idea was that the way to win without firing a gun was through ideological warfare and psychological warfare. This underscores the importance of preventing soldiers from falling prey to communist ideology even before actual combat begins. It emphasized the necessity of instilling this awareness as a foundation when fighting against the Communist Party.

The second point was that, in order to defeat the Communists, one must have an unshakable belief in democracy and recognize that defending the democratic constitutional system is the mission of the national military. Therefore, in carrying out their duties, particularly in leadership, military officers must respect human rights, which are the core values of a democratic state. Considering that past military life had been riddled with abuses like beatings and punishments, the Minister's stance implied a clear intent to reform these corrupt practices.

The third emphasis was something anyone could understand: the importance of concern for soldiers’ welfare. General Chulgi, having fought on the mainland front alongside the Nationalist Army against the Communists, had directly witnessed the stark difference in morale between units that cared for soldier welfare and those that did not. This experience led him, upon taking responsibility for building South Korea’s military, to stress that the foundation of discipline and morale lies in solving issues of troop welfare. This "soldier-first" approach was a reflection of Chulgi’s exceptional strategic and military thinking.

Organizing Military Reserve Forces

On January 15, 1946, the U.S. military government began creating the National Defense Guard with the character of a police reserve force. They initially envisioned it as a reserve police organization but planned to eventually transform it into a full national defense force. Taking South Korea’s fiscal capacity into account, they aimed to keep the troop numbers within 50,000.

Accordingly, when the Republic of Korea was established, the number of defense guard troops was roughly within that 50,000 range.

Thus, when General Chulgi was appointed as the first Minister of National Defense, he faced the urgent need to rapidly expand the Korean military, which was far too weak to confront the North Korean communist forces.

While advocating for an elite military force, a pressing issue that weighed heavily on the Minister's mind was how to organize and mobilize military reserves. At that time, the defense guard operated on a volunteer system, and as a result, there were virtually no reservists who could be called up after discharge. To solve this, General Chulgi proposed the creation of the Homeland Defense Army. He received significant assistance in structuring this new system from General Shin Tae-young, former Army Chief of Staff and father of General Shin Eung-gyun.

On November 20, 1948, the Homeland Defense Army was finally established through an emergency presidential decree. Since there were no discharged veterans available, they had to consider alternative measures.

Using Youth Organizations for Reserves

Another issue that couldn't be overlooked was the potential use of youth organizations for reserve forces. At the time, numerous youth groups such as the Korean National Youth Corps (Minjok Cheongnyeondan) had unique structures and operational methods. Among them, the National Youth Corps had been trained and organized under General Chulgi's direct supervision after his return from China, and was known as a patriotic youth movement akin to Hitler Youth, tightly bonded with the general's fate.

There was no doubt that this group formed the core of Chulgi's domestic political base.

However, all youth groups were eventually merged under the Korean Youth Corps on October 4, 1948, with Shin Mo appointed as leader. This unification marked the point where General Chulgi voluntarily relinquished his political base.

This may have been due to his then-current position as Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense. But more likely, it was because Chulgi was a man who could not disobey any directive from President Syngman Rhee.

Behind this unification of youth groups was also a political movement aiming to check and neutralize Chulgi's influence. At the time, rumors circulated that, if left unchecked, the National Youth Corps and the military under Chulgi's command could soon become the core of a coup. One group suspected of spreading such rumors was the so-called "Group of Seven," a political faction centered around Heo Jeong.

To suppress Chulgi's political influence, this Group of Seven frequently met, and their first step was to dissolve the National Youth Corps under the guise of youth group unification. The second step was to remove General Chulgi from his post as Minister of National Defense.

Ironically, even Shin Sung-mo, whom Chulgi had brought from overseas and appointed as Minister of the Interior, and Chae Byung-duk, whom he personally named Army Chief of Staff, reportedly participated in these gatherings. Such events reflect the ephemeral and fickle nature of political power.

Despite the chaotic domestic and international conditions faced by the newborn nation, and despite Chulgi's sincere dedication to building an independent national defense and ensuring the survival and prosperity of the Korean people, he was ultimately dismissed from his post as Minister of National Defense on March 21, 1949, due to the machinations of a few who failed to understand his vision and efforts.

On the Creation of the Women's Army Corps

General Chulgi also gave deep thought to how the entire population, including women, should be mobilized and organized in preparation for both ideological and military invasions from communists. This stemmed from his understanding of the nature of modern warfare, which requires maximum utilization of all available human resources in building a high-level national defense state.

As a modern democratic state, the Republic of Korea needed to quickly cast off the remnants of its feudal past and strive toward a gender-equal democratic society aligned with advanced nations. General Chulgi firmly believed this.

In that spirit, he pushed forward with the idea of creating a Women's Army Corps—not only as a miniature version of modern society but also as a symbolic gesture of male-female cooperation.

The U.S. military's own women's corps helped to overcome internal resistance within the Korean military, although there were many who opposed the idea, citing concerns over accommodations, uniforms, and the extra attention female soldiers might require from commanding officers.

But for General Chulgi, this was not theoretical—it was based on experience and conviction. He believed female participation in the military would meaningfully enhance the Korean military's strength. His belief was shaped by his experiences with women in the independence movement and armed struggle, who endured the same hardships as men.

This belief was reflected in the creation of Korea's Women's Army Corps. When it was founded, and the first women's corps director, Kim Hyun-sook, was appointed, General Chulgi reportedly gave an unforgettable speech during a briefing:

"Throughout history, men have never been cowards before beautiful women, and women have always wanted to appear beautiful before brave men. Now that women serve in the military, men must carry themselves with even greater pride."

Within this humorous remark lay a profound vision.

No one, I believe, can deny the truth contained within those words.

Since then, the Women's Army Corps has made considerable progress and contributed significantly to the management and operations of military administration. But more than anything, if we consider the historical significance of how the system of women in the military contributed to the modernization of a traditional society, we cannot help but bow our heads in respect to General Cheolgi's foresight.

Appointment of former military personnel outside the official system

When the U.S. military government was planning to establish the National Defense Guard, it goes without saying that training new commanders was an urgent necessity. In that context, the U.S. military government prioritized those with prior military experience and opened a military English school to teach basic military English to interested applicants.

Of course, the main goal of establishing this military English school was to enhance cooperation with the U.S. military, but at the same time, there was also an underlying intent to consolidate the many hastily formed paramilitary organizations that had sprung up in late 1945 after liberation, and bring them under the guidance of the U.S. military government. At that time, suppressing left-wing military organizations was also a major concern for the right-wing camp.

Under such circumstances, the individuals who gathered at the military English school were primarily former members of the Japanese military, the Manchukuo army, or young men who had served as student soldiers in the Japanese military. However, not all those with prior military experience were willing to cooperate with the U.S. military government. Some of them were organizing their own groups in anticipation of a new nation being established and a new government formed, hoping to become the backbone of a future national army.

A good example of this would be the Air, Land, and Sea Comradeship group led by General Kim Suk-won, who had served in the Japanese military. At that time, the police under Cho Byung-ok and Jang Taek-sang, who had received American carbines and submachine guns even before the National Defense Guard, were loudly claiming that they would become the foundation of the national military.

However, the National Defense Guard continued to make steady progress up until the founding of the Republic of Korea.

Through skirmishes in the Taegu Uprising and guerrilla suppression operations, it grew in both organization and equipment, becoming the only military organization to move south. When the Republic of Korea government was established, this Land-Sea Guard was formally reorganized into the Army and Navy of the Republic of Korea, and no one raised any objections to this reorganization.

Still, when the Guard was reorganized into the national military, the issue of not widely appointing former military personnel from a broader perspective was a challenge that the first Minister of National Defense had to address from the outset.

Among the former military men who refused to cooperate with the U.S. military government and waited instead for a national government to be established, many were former members of the Korean Liberation Army (Kwangbok-gun). These were soldiers who had dedicated their lives to national independence, and it's completely understandable that they were reluctant to participate in a military organization under U.S. military control, even if it was later to become the national army.

As soon as he took office, General Cheolgi, the newly appointed Minister of National Defense, set out to resolve this personnel issue and strengthen military leadership by bringing in officers who could earn the trust and love of the people.

He arranged for General Kim Hong-il, who had been residing overseas, to return to Korea. He also decided to recruit key former members of the Korean Liberation Army such as Oh Gwang-seon, Ahn Chun-saeng, Lee Joon-sik, Park Young-jun, Kwon Jun, Jang Heung, Yoo Seung-yeol, Ahn Byung-beom, Shin Tae-young, Kim Suk-won, Baek Hong-seok, Lee Da-young, and Lee Jong-chan.

As a result, the National Defense Guard, which had until then been composed mainly of younger junior officers like Lee Hyung-seok and Lee Yong-moon, gained new weight and authority as it absorbed experienced and seasoned military personnel during its reorganization into the national military.

Among the veterans, General Lee Eung-jun was particularly special. When the U.S. authorities asked him to take full responsibility for establishing the National Guard, he initially declined, stating he was unqualified because he had served in the Japanese military. However, when questioned by the U.S. military—"Why can someone who served under Japan not participate in building his own country's military?"—he accepted a position as an advisor.

Later, while assisting with the formation of the Guard as a Korean advisor, I had the honor of working under General Lee Eung-jun. I was deeply impressed by how confidently he expressed his own views and stood firm whenever disagreements arose with the American advisors. General Lee Eung-jun truly played a central role in nurturing the Guard into the foundation of the national military.

When General Cheolgi became Minister of National Defense and sought to bring in former military personnel, he faced resistance from American advisors—but needless to say, he was not the kind of man to back down from such matters. That a man with such a strong sense of identity as General Cheolgi was appointed Minister of National Defense during the transitional period from U.S. military rule to national self-governance was an immense blessing for the Korean military.

How General Cheolgi governed the Ministry of National Defense

General Cheolgi's appointment as Minister of National Defense was, by and large, expected both by the general public and within military circles, so there was no significant backlash. Without a doubt, he was the most suitable person to serve as the Minister of National Defense in the new Republic of Korea.

It wasn't only because of his background in the armed struggle for independence. His grand vision and bold ambition for the construction of a new state, and especially for building a strong national military, quickly won him the trust and respect of the military leadership.

Because he was concurrently serving as Prime Minister, the time he could spend at the Ministry of National Defense was naturally limited. Therefore, many urgent documents had to be taken to the Prime Minister's office for his signature.

No matter how complicated the matter was, even if it was deemed urgent or sensitive, the Minister never once withheld or delayed approval. Whatever the documents may have been, he always signed off on them clearly, and never once confused public matters with private ones. Whenever the opportunity arose, the Minister would speak about the spirit of selfless public service, and his words and actions were always seen as the model of such integrity.

One clear example of the Minister's principle of strictly separating public and private affairs was visible in how he handled what were, in those days, essentially political donations from civilians. Though such donations were considered, in effect, at the free disposal of the Minister, he was often seen handing them over to Chief of Staff Chae Byung-deok. As a young officer, I was deeply moved every time I witnessed this.

The Minister had a trait of unwavering trust: once he believed in someone, no one could convince him otherwise. A prime example of this was his relationship with the Chief of Staff. From the moment General Chulgi (Lee Beom-seok) concurrently took office as the Minister of National Defense, he poured great thought and care into selecting the Chief of Staff. After thorough consideration from various angles, he appointed General Chae Byung-deok to the position. From that point forward, all military administration and command matters were, in principle, entrusted to him. Rather than merely delegating, Chulgi set general policy guidelines and then gave full autonomy in execution. Perhaps this was inevitable given his concurrent role as Prime Minister, but it is widely acknowledged that this delegation was not because he lacked conviction in military affairs.

General Chulgi had gone into exile in China during his third year at Kyungseong High School, now Gyeonggi High School, and graduated from the Chinese Army Cavalry Academy in 1916. That was when he began writing the first chapter of his life as a founding father of the Republic of Korea and future Minister of National Defense. In 1920, he earned great fame in the independence movement by annihilating the main forces of a Japanese division at the Battle of Cheongsanri. In 1923, he became commander of the Korean Revolutionary Army's cavalry regiment and was wounded in battle while fighting to expel White Russian forces. In 1925,

convinced that communism could not be a guiding principle for national independence or sovereignty, he turned staunchly anti-communist.

Before liberation, he served as the Chief of Staff of the Korean Liberation Army and gained valuable experience in both frontline and rear operations through positions such as operations director of the Chinese military, member of the Chinese Army's 9th Military Inspection Unit, and senior staff in regional commands.

In the turbulent storms of revolutionary military life, General Chulgi seemed to have developed the temperament of absolute loyalty—once he trusted a comrade, he trusted him to the end. This trait was clearly visible in his attitude toward the Chief of Staff he had appointed.

General Chulgi was, without a doubt, a loyal follower and supporter of President Syngman Rhee. As his secretary, I once went so far as to tell him that when he disagreed with national policy, he ought to speak frankly to the President. He immediately rebuked me for my insolence and stressed that the Korean people must unite solidly around President Rhee to build a new nation. He firmly believed that in those chaotic times, no one but President Rhee could lead the country.

Everyone knew that General Chulgi was multi-talented. A cavalryman by training, he was an excellent horseman and marksman. He spoke English and Russian fluently. When he didn't want others to overhear, he would sometimes converse in Russian with his wife. He was also a gifted speaker. Though not exactly an orator, the countless stories he shared from his rich experience captivated anyone who listened. I don't know if it was his way with words or his presence, but I sensed that he had a literary soul.

The eight months I served as chief secretary to General Chulgi at the Ministry of National Defense were a deeply formative period in my life. From learning the proper posture of a soldier to the attitude one should carry as a human being, the influence of General Chulgi on my youthful development was profound. Because of that, even though I held no real power and my position was limited to administrative duties, I was often misunderstood as being on the same level as other secretaries who held personnel or financial authority. But I never minded—I was just honored to serve him.

After General Chulgi stepped away from public office, I was once accused of securing political funds for him from within the military—an absurd rumor. During the 5.16 military coup, I was even falsely accused of planning a counterrevolution with a few so-called "Chulgi faction" officers in the army. It was a time when people who once desperately sought his favor now pretended not to know him once he stepped down as Minister. Witnessing such cold-hearted shifts in public sentiment, I came to reflect bitterly on my own cowardice and shortcomings.

One of General Chulgi's final weekends as Minister was spent going duck hunting near Pyeongtaek. I had been summoned that morning and told we were heading out for a bit of exercise, as he was concerned about my health and believed hunting was a good form of training for a soldier. On that sunny early spring day, I went hunting for the first time using one of his spare rifles. Ironically, while the General had no luck, I managed to shoot down a duck and save face for our group. I'll never forget how he praised me, saying I wasn't a "fake soldier" after all.

We stayed overnight at the Onyang Railroad Hotel. After dinner, I noticed that somehow, the county governor and police chief had heard about our visit and came by the hotel to greet the General. Just a few days later, General Chulgi resigned from his post, and Shin Sung-mo was appointed as the new Minister.

One day, Minister Shin told me something that left me utterly speechless. He said something along the lines of, "What kind of country are we running here if the Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense go hunting in the countryside and disrupt hardworking farmers, accepting hospitality from local officials?" I was so dumbfounded I couldn't respond at all.

"We understand the General's true intentions well. However, in a presidential system, there must be no bad precedent where a presidential decision is subject to multiple interpretations. Since this is still the early stage of our government, we believe we must pay particular attention to this matter in order to handle national affairs properly."

With polite formality but a blunt tone, Colonel Roberts delivered these words.

The debate became heated over whether or not to establish a Department of Political Education (Jeonghun-guk) and a Fourth Bureau within the Ministry of National Defense. General Yi Beom-seok strongly advocated for ideological arming of the military and emphasized the necessity of a proactive psychological warfare strategy against North Korea. He persistently explained that the military should be equipped with thorough anti-communist ideology and argued that a bold counteroffensive was required, especially given that the North Korean regime had dispatched many armed guerrilla units into the South.

Upon taking office as both Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense, General Yi shared a viewpoint common among many other politicians — that a complete overhaul of the Defense Security Command was necessary. Possibly as a side effect of this view, rumors spread within the army shortly after his appointment that No Tae-jun, a deputy leader of the National Youth Corps, might be named Army Chief of Staff.

No Tae-jun was the adopted son of the famous General No Baek-rin and a heavy-set, quiet patriot educated at Luoyang Military Academy in China. While serving in the Second Detachment of the Liberation Army under General Yi Beom-seok, he had once hidden for four weeks in a ceiling compartment in Xian, collecting critical intelligence on Japanese forces — a feat well known within military circles.

However, No Tae-jun personally declined the appointment and respected the principle that the Defense Security Command should remain the core of the national military structure. He fully understood that an outsider should not be selected as Army Chief of Staff.

Even so, the mere rumor of his appointment caused serious backlash within the U.S. military advisory group. One officer said:

“The placement of political officers in the military is a system used by Hitler and the Communists. In a democratic nation, the military must remain politically neutral and not adopt the same model as those under one-party dictatorships. We cannot allow the introduction of a political officer system under any circumstances.”

Yi Beom-seok responded:

“How can a military fighting the Communists do so without being ideologically armed with anti-communism? You don’t understand what communism really is. As Minister of National Defense, I will arm the military with anti-communist ideology myself.”

A government official countered:

“Sir, as career military officers, we believe that the structure suggested by the President is different from yours. As you know, in the United States, the Secretary of Defense is a 100% appointee of the President. The President appoints the Chiefs of Staff for each military branch and delegates all command authority to them. The operational and administrative control of all military units is under their direction. There can be no unit outside of the Chief of Staff’s command, nor any unit directly under the Minister of National Defense. Therefore, the task of instilling anti-communist ideology should also be assigned to the Chiefs of Staff.”

Yi Beom-seok argued:

“The President himself said that ‘ideological arming is the most important.’ That’s why it makes perfect sense to establish a Political Education Bureau within the Ministry of Defense, train political officers there, and deploy them to the respective units.”

The opposition responded:

“There might be a need for an institution that trains political officers. But that is not the job of the Ministry of Defense. It is the responsibility of the respective service Chiefs of Staff. Training and education are the most important missions under their purview. Just as the Infantry School, Military Police School, and Artillery School operate under the Chiefs of Staff, so should the training facility for political officers.”

Yi Beom-seok pushed further:

“Anti-communist ideological education is a separate matter. How can soldiers conduct ideological education themselves? Eventually, yes, the military should handle it, but for now, shouldn't the Ministry of Defense handle it through the Political Education Bureau?”

The opposition stood firm:

“Anti-communist education for the general public can be handled by civilian administrative agencies. But within the military — which is a disciplined and hierarchical organization — all training and education must be the responsibility of the commanding officers. If the Minister’s

proposal to directly control the Political Education Bureau is adopted, we will end up with two separate military chains of command within the Republic of Korea: one under the Minister of Defense and the other under the Chief of Staff. That would replicate the flaws of Hitler's military or the Communist systems, where the military is monitored and controlled by political officers loyal to a dictator."

At this, Yi Beom-seok backed down.

"Understood. I will withdraw my proposal."

Thus ended the bitter dispute between Yi Beom-seok and Colonel Roberts. Roberts not only formally voiced his opposition to the Minister of National Defense but also made it clear that the U.S. advisory group would not support the establishment of the Fourth Bureau within the Ministry.

This firm stance by the advisory group largely reflected official U.S. policy. According to their principles, it was not acceptable to place special forces or politically charged units directly under the Defense Ministry.

However, the situation was too complicated to dismiss as a simple policy disagreement. There were whispers that all of this was part of a coordinated smear campaign against General Yi Beom-seok. In political circles, rumors of a coup attempt by Yi were circulating widely. Some believed the refusal to give Yi direct command over a military unit was a deliberate effort to prevent any such move.

Coincidentally, rumors were circulating that Yi's former comrade and current deputy of the National Youth Corps, No Tae-jun, might become the new Army Chief of Staff. These rumors coincided with heated debates over establishing both the Fourth Bureau and the Political Education Bureau — both of which would have been units directly under the Defense Minister's control.

The chaotic transition period proved too overwhelming to be managed by the well-meaning patriotism of inexperienced officials in a newly born nation. The people had not yet fully understood the difference between a presidential system and a cabinet system, nor the proper distinction between military command and administrative control. Even basic issues such as the relationship between the Commander-in-Chief, the Defense Minister, and the Chiefs of Staff lacked a clear framework.

Most of the cabinet members, members of the National Assembly, and high-ranking politicians were bewildered by the sudden switch from a cabinet system to a presidential system overnight. Many leading figures who had previously championed the cabinet system now held on to the illusion that something similar to cabinet governance could still exist under President Syngman Rhee.

This illusion led many cabinet ministers, including the Prime Minister, to develop serious misunderstandings — without even realizing it themselves.

334 **May (1919):** Seo Il, Jung Gwang-dan, and others reorganized the Korean Justice Corps (@0). Around mid-May, they left the Haija Cavalry Regiment and arrived in Shanghai, where they stayed for four months.

July: Woo Young met with Shin Gyu-sik, Ahn Chang-ho, and No Baek-rin in Shanghai. Disillusioned by the factionalism within the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, he decided, under the guidance of Yi Dong-nyeong and Shin Gyu-sik, to go to Manchuria to engage in militant resistance against Japanese rule.

August: The Korean Independence Army Command was established under the Korean Justice Corps as a militant independence organization.

September: Under the leadership of Kim Jwa-jin and Park Chan-ik, the Gando Military Government Office (Gilrim Gunjeongsa) was established. When military activities became difficult, they moved to Daehwasa in Gyuhwa-hyeon, West Jiandao, and set up another military office. Park Chan-ik, with help from Mrs. Eun Ju, conducted diplomatic negotiations in Beijing with Jo Seong-hwan, under Zhang Zuolin's regime.

Chi Jin (벨럼: 뿔슈%) went to Manchuria (Choi Jin was arrested by Japanese police for bombing the Miryang police station). Park Chan-ik, in the Gando Military Office, learned from Gilrim that Jang Gil-sang (brother of Jang Taek-sang) had entrusted a large donation of 10,000 won to Son Mo for the Provisional Government.

The Gando Military Office decided to use the money for effective military operations. Ji Cheong-cheon was chosen as the negotiation representative. Bae Cheon-taek in Shanghai was also contacted for cooperation. Though there were internal debates in the Provisional Government over the use of funds, Yi Si-yeong strongly advocated sending it to the Gando Military Office, which was ultimately approved.

October: The Korean Justice Corps and the Korean Military Association merged to form the Korean Military Government (President Seo Il, Vice President Hyeon Cheon-mok, Commander Kim Jwa-jin). They applied for recognition as the military arm under the Provisional Government. The Sinhung School was reorganized as the Sinhung Military Academy. Due to conflicts from a murder incident, the school in Humniah was closed and relocated to Gosanja, Hadongdaesa.

After arriving in Samwonbo, Gyuhwa-hyeon, Jiandao from Shanghai, and introduced by Yi Si-yeong, Woo Young became an instructor at the Military Academy. He led officer training alongside Kim Gwang-seo, Shin Pal-gyun, and Ji Cheong-cheon.

January 17: The Korean National Association and the Western Jiandao Military Government were reorganized.
February: The Sinhung Military Academy was reorganized into a regiment-sized formation,

with Woo Young becoming its leader.
March 1, 1920: They crossed the Yalu River, entered Changjae, Jasong, and Hyesanjin, attempting to initiate the March 1st Independence Movement there. Woo Young led an education squad as the unit commander.

December: The Provisional Government officially recognized the Korean Military Government as its affiliated military institution under Decree No. 205.

1920 (21 years old): Due to extreme cold in Sanseongja, Hailong-hyeon, Seo Il contracted frostbite and lost toes on one foot. Efforts to secure a large quantity of weapons failed.
February 29: Ji Cheong-cheon failed to return from Shanghai.
August 1: A major operation was planned.
June–September: Disillusioned and stressed, Woo Young sought treatment at a military medical unit in Samwonbo, where he attempted suicide by overdosing on two ounces of opium (over 30 grams) mixed in water.

In Seodaepashipri-pyeong, Wangqing-hyeon, the Korean Military Government constructed barracks and officer training facilities (director: Kim Jwa-jin). Kim requested that the Western Jiandao Military Government send Cheol-gi for assistance.

Woo Young went to Wangqing-hyeon, Jilin Province (Northern Jiandao) and was appointed as an instructor at the Northern Jiandao Military Government Office, leading military training. He was later named Director of Training, educating 600 cadets.

Summer 1920: The Korean Northern Military Government, Shinmindan, and other independence units defeated Japanese forces at the Battle of Bongo-dong. When troops dispersed, they took refuge in the Northern Military Government.

In the forests of Seodaepashipri-pyeong, the officer academy and infantry barracks were completed. Weapons were purchased from retreating Czechoslovak troops in Vladivostok, including 1,100 rifles, six machine guns, three mortars, 800,000 rounds of ammunition, grenades, and pistols, through negotiations with General Gajda over three meetings.

The Korean Military Government established the "Model Unit" from its security unit, which guarded the base and command posts. Cheol-gi was named company commander.

Concerned about Japan sending massive reinforcements into Manchuria, Zhang Zuolin appointed Meng Futok as commander to suppress the independence forces. Japan finalized its plan to subjugate the Koreans in Jiandao.

Officer Academy: The first graduation ceremony was held. Cheol-gi was made commander of the newly formed Training Battalion.

September 17–18: A forward and main detachment of the Korean Military Government left Seodaepashipri-pyeong.

October 2: In Anto-hyeon, Japanese police and bandits jointly attacked the Japanese consulate in Hunchun (Hunchun Incident). Using this as a pretext, Japan dispatched large forces to Manchuria, including the 19th and 20th Divisions from Korea and the 11th, 13th, and 14th Divisions from Siberia.

Though various groups (Gukminhoe, Uigunbu, Hanminhoe, Uimindan) initially agreed to cooperate with the Northern Military Government and divide responsibilities, all but one Hanminhoe company later withdrew.

October 12–13: The Korean Military Government's troops arrived in Cheongsan-ri.

October 21 (Lunar September 7): The Battle of Cheongsan-ri began (Baekunpyeong engagement).
October 22, 5:30 AM: Cheol-gi's training unit ambushed Japanese forces at Cheonsupyeong.
October 23–24: Fighting continued at Eorangchon. Independent units split into squads of 50 to break through encirclement. Cheol-gi and Kim Jwa-jin led separate squads. Around 3 PM, Kim's unit clashed with Japanese at Maenggaegol.
9 PM: Near Cheonbosan, Cheol-gi encountered a Japanese company and was stabbed in the left chest with a bayonet in a fierce night battle. Though not fatal, he was seriously wounded.

October 25–26: Hong Beom-do's troops defeated two Japanese platoons at Godonghagul (Godonghae Battle).
October 28: Independent troops, now broken into small units, regrouped at Wangguryeongchon, Anto-hyeon.

October 29: After a coordination meeting, units that had fought at Cheongsan-ri agreed to relocate north to Milsan (밀산).

January 15 (1921): The independence forces reached Samchagu in Junyang-hyang, Wangqing-hyeon. Japanese forces had their divisional HQ in Samchagu and dispatched the 8th regiment. At Samsollyeong (Shinseonduri), the unit took shelter. Cheol-gi suffered severe frostbite to his hands and feet, requiring about 20 days of treatment.

Late December: After three months, independence forces regrouped in Milsan.

December: Syngman Rhee arrived in Shanghai from the United States and became President of the Provisional Government.